



CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS FOR INQUIRY & CRITIQUE: THE DAPP TOOL

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About the Centers

Great Lakes Equity Center (Center) is an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Center engages in equity-focused technical assistance and related research with educational and community agencies focused on systemic improvements to serve all learners with particular focus on educational access, participation and outcomes for those who have been historically marginalized. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Center and provides technical assistance related to educational equity based on student race, national origin, sex, and religion at no cost to public educational agencies throughout its 13-state region in the Midwest and Plains.



Introduction

As has been noted elsewhere, national education policy at the turn of this century focused attention on educational inequities in schools across the United States. Twenty years later, we continue to face extraordinary inequities and injustices in schools and broader society that hinder progress toward full access, participation, progress and outcomes for people inclusive of the broad range of individual and socio-cultural identities and expressions (Radd et al., 2021).

With so much effort and so many resources directed toward reversing the persistence of inequity and injustice, why is there such little progress? Certainly, there are a multitude of answers to this question. The literature on organizational and systems change directs our attention away from technical approaches to change, and toward systems analysis and double-loop learning. Argyris (2002) distinguishes double-loop learning from single-loop learning in noting that single-loop learning addresses technical issues and produces the same outcome. For example, when schools select a new math curriculum, but do not see marked improvement in learning among students who struggled with the previous curriculum, the new curriculum is producing the same outcomes as the previous curriculum; thus, change that is informed by single-loop learning.

In contrast, double-loop learning occurs when we question the underlying assumptions and norms in a given situation. For example, our current school funding models suggest that students whose parents earn more money, or have greater wealth, should logically have fancier, better equipped, and better staffed schools. Alternately, there is an acceptance in society that if a student's parents work a minimum wage job or do not have the savings to buy a home, then it is ok if that student's school is poorly equipped, poorly staffed, and poorly maintained. If alternately we decided that well-equipped, well-staffed, and well-maintained schools were every child's right, we would likely devise a



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different funding model, not based on property taxes, and not based on the assumption that parental income/wealth should determine the quality of a child's school. That new funding model would be an example of change that was informed by double-loop learning.

Thus, the *DAPP (Difference & Dissonance, Assumptions, Power, and Patterns) Tool* is intended to help educators, leaders, teams, schools, districts, education agencies, and other organizations to engage in double-loop thinking, learning, planning, and change.

To create more educational equity, double-loop thinking requires *critical consciousness* (for more information on critical consciousness, please see the MAP Center's briefs [Radd & Macey \(2013\)](#) and/or [Radd \(2019\)](#)). Critical consciousness is a term that was originally posed by Paulo Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In that volume, he spoke of conscientization, the need for those who experience oppression to become aware of, and organize against, the presence and process of systems of power that act to constrain freedom, liberty, and access.

For the purposes of this tool, I use the term "critical consciousness" to denote two aspects of equity-focused leadership:

First, it is the willingness and ability to see how power and privilege are at work to systematically advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others. Further, critical consciousness includes the process of transforming new insight into more socially just [ways of seeing and understanding]. In other words, it is simultaneously an ongoing and growing awareness and knowledge of power, privilege and oppression combined with a habit of openness and learning in order to disrupt injustice and create more just action, processes, structures, and circumstances. (Radd & Kramer, 2016, p. 584)

Critical consciousness is needed in equity-focused leadership because of two complex social phenomena known as ideology and hegemony (Radd & Kramer, 2016). Brookfield (2005) defined the sociological notion of ideology in an accessible and relevant when he wrote:

[Ideology is] the broadly accepted set of values, beliefs, myths, explanations, and justifications that appears self-evidently true, empirically accurate, personally relevant, and morally desirable to a majority of the populace. The function of this ideology is to maintain an unjust social and political order. Ideology does this by



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convincing people that existing social arrangements are naturally ordained and obviously work for the good of all. (p.41)

The related term, hegemony, is

broader than ideology, and consists of the set of social constructions that undergird and perpetuate the dominant ideology in such a way that the individuals and groups who are oppressed actually consent to, and even work to uphold, an unequal and unjust system because of their belief in its discursively-promoted promises (Brookfield, 2005; Eagleton, 1991; Gramsci, as cited in Femia, 1981). (Radd & Kramer, 2016, p. 585).

In short, ideology is the overall container of things we think, structures and processes we establish, rules we follow, and the like. Importantly, because of the complex web in which these things are woven together to create the context of a society's functioning, it seems like, "just the way things are." Further, though many members of a society may believe that some aspects of the society should be done differently, overall a society, as a collection of individual members who tacitly agree to abide by the ideology, works to maintain the status quo, believing that it is for the good of all. Then, the hegemonic nature of that ideology means that even those who are oppressed in that system believe in its goodness, consent to participate in it, and in doing so, work to uphold it. Critical consciousness is necessary because almost all of us are taught to believe, at one level or another, that the way things are is logical and reasonable. Many scholars and contemporary thought leaders refer to this as "the colonization of the mind" (for more information see, for example, D'Errico, 2018). Even in times of extraordinary social upheaval, this colonization constrains thinking that results in change that is informed by single-loop learning .

The *DAPP Tool* is intended to support individuals, dyads, and groups in engaging in the type of critical reflection necessary to build critical consciousness and undertake more equitable and just actions. The idea here is that by engaging in intentional reflection, questioning, and critique, we can more regularly identify how power is used, and with what impact. More specifically, we look to see how power aligns with various socio-cultural identities to advantage persons with those identities, and disadvantage and exclude those without them.

An example might be useful: Schools tend to have rules and guidelines for student behavior. On their surface, these rules and guidelines may appear neutral. In other



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words, they do not appear to target Black and brown students, [students with disabilities](#), students living in poverty, or [students with non-conforming or fluid gender expressions](#). And yet, students with those socio-cultural identities experience higher rates of discipline, suspension and expulsion. Often, school personnel may mistakenly believe that this is merely the result of individual short-comings and behaviors. However, these disparities result from a combination of reasons, the majority of which are beyond the student's control.



Four Domains for Inquiry and Critique

The *DAPP Tool* draws on four domains for inquiry and critique: Difference and Dissonance, Assumptions, Power, and Patterns. Here, I explain these four domains and the reasons they aid the practice of Critical Consciousness.

- ***Difference and Dissonance:*** In the *DAPP Tool*, *difference* refers to varying, competing or contradictory perspectives, information, expressions of values, ways of appearing, ways of completing work, ways of thinking about responsibilities, and so on. This matters because the human mind struggles to accept difference, such that when difference is too powerful, a person feels “dissonance.” *Dissonance* is a feeling you get when something “just isn’t right.” It is a reaction you have when something you see, hear or experience, doesn’t match the way you think things should be. It creates an emotional and physical reaction, which you may or may not notice, because when people feel dissonance, they usually react quickly in words or action to dismiss, deny, or denigrate the dissonant information (Radd & Kramer, 2016). Some people believe that they like, or are even attracted to, difference. That may be true when differences are present at the surface level. But humans are wired to feel dissonance and act accordingly when they experience difference that contradicts their underlying mental models. If we can learn to sit with the discomfort of the dissonance and examine the source of our reaction, then we can begin to open our minds to the information that we would otherwise have dismissed. This is important because (1) our minds favor familiar information and interpretations over dissonant information; and (2) through our individual and collective ideologies, we are familiar with information that masks inequity, inequality, and injustice. In short, in order to advance equity, we need to notice and sit with that which causes us dissonance, especially when it is connected to privileged aspects of our identities .
- ***Assumptions:*** Assumptions occur when our minds link two or more pieces of information in unnoticeable ways that may or may not be accurate or logical upon further examination. Everything we think, say, and do contains assumptions (Brookfield, 2005). This is true for simple things, like if I use the brakes (on my car, my bicycle, or my relationship) its forward movement will come to a halt. It’s also true for more complex scenarios, such as if we put people (or schools) in competition with one another, they will all perform better. Brookfield (2005) outlines three classifications of assumptions¹: Causal (beliefs about cause-effect relationships, often marked by “if-then” statements); Prescriptive (beliefs about what should

¹See Radd & Macey (2013) for more information about these assumptions, and why they matter.



Four Domains for Inquiry and Critique (continued)

happen, be done, how people should act or react); and Paradigmatic (deep-seated beliefs that we see as fundamentally true). Searching for, identifying, and understanding the impact of our assumptions is “one of the most challenging intellectual puzzles we face in our lives...something we instinctively resist, for fear of what we might discover” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 2). Identifying and correcting assumptions is hard work, but especially important for equity practice because it is in the taken-for-granted and unexamined that inequity thrives. Thus, one way to practice critical reflection is to identify, examine, and correct assumptions in order to develop more complete, accurate, and just understandings and ways of seeing.

- **Power:** In thinking about how power relates to educational equity, it is important to consider both formal and informal power. Formal power is positional power; in other words, it comes from/with a person’s role. For example, a principal can hire or discipline a teacher; a teacher decides on assignments and issues grades. These are formal, or positional, forms and uses of power. In addition, power can also be informal. This is the type of power a person has to influence a situation or other people just by virtue of their actions or ways of being. In a school, this is a teacher or student who, through whatever means – bullying, popularity, or respect – can make things happen, or equally, prevent them from happening. Many times, people assume that power has been earned, that the person who holds it deserves to hold it, and it is likely to be used fairly and in the best interests of all. However, this is not always the case. In particular, one way that privilege manifests is through possession of, access to, and use of both formal and informal power.
- **Patterns:** One thing we have learned about instances of injustice, inequity and inequality is that they rarely occur in isolation, but instead, occur in patterns. A pattern is merely when something is repeated in a predictable way. When school administrators suspend Black students disproportionately, or teachers repeatedly call on the cisgender male students in their classrooms before calling on female or gender-fluid individuals, these are patterns that can be documented through observation and/or data. Disaggregating data and looking for patterns is one way to spot inequality and inequity that needs correction.



Four Domains for Inquiry and Critique (continued)

The *DAPP Tool* contains a series of questions in each domain. The questions are intended to stimulate critical reflection related to the domain. You can use this tool in a variety of ways, because the power is in the questions, the subsequent pause to contemplate your response, and the insights you derive as you reflect on your response. The purpose of the questions is to prompt you to see what you previously did not see, and subsequently direct you toward more equitable and just thinking and actions.

To obtain this goal, you will need to think specifically about categories of identities where marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion occur, such as race, sex/gender/sexual identity, religion, socio-economic class, language, and national origin. For example, when you are looking for Patterns of Advantage and Disadvantage, consider how people of various races experience more or fewer opportunities. Typically, White people with middle to upper incomes and without disabilities experience far more and far more economically beneficial opportunities than persons of color with middle to lower incomes and/or persons with disabilities. In addition, while you will always be able to find one or a handful of individuals whose experience doesn't match the overall pattern (for example, when a Black person earns more money or has more wealth than a White person), you want to look at the group or identity category level rather than the individual level when using the tool.



How to Use the DAPP Tool

To use the tool individually, consider a situation or problem you face, or a course of action you are considering. Review the domains and questions and find those that cause you to pause. The pause can be because it reveals an answer that is so plainly obvious in how you can move toward equity that you missed it. Or, the pause can be because it challenges you to examine the situation from a new angle. Remember, the purpose of the tool is not to help you affirm what you already think; instead, the purpose is to challenge you to see perspectives, possibilities, and realities that you missed, overlooked, dismissed, or did not have access to in the past. Challenge yourself to interact with the questions that cause you to see new information and/or current information from a substantially different angle.

To use the tool as a dyad, one person can act as a “coach” and the other the “coachee.” The coachee shares their situation, problem, or planned course of action, and the coach uses the tool to pose questions that will challenge the coachee’s thinking, perspective, or decision-making. In this use, the coach needs to be a thoughtful and careful listener to identify areas where it would be useful to probe and explore the coachee’s thinking for what had previously been unexamined. The overall purpose, again, is to identify and examine perspectives, possibilities, and realities that were not previously known or considered, remembering that ultimately, the goal is to identify new and deeper insights for advancing educational equity.

In a group, the tool can be especially powerful and useful. One way to use the tool in a group is to have one individual share their situation, problem or planned course of action, and have the others in the group take turns asking questions from the tool, and probing responses to go deeper in analyzing the forces at play. Another approach is to use the tool to explore something that the group is facing or contemplating. In this use, the group would agree on the situation they are examining, and then move through the questions to explore the situation using an equity lens. Alternately, the group could break up into six smaller groups (one each for Difference, Power, Patterns, and each type of Assumptions), and each work their way through a section of questions. Following the small group conversations, reconvene into the large group to share insights, observations, and new directions.



How to Use the DAPP Tool (continued)

Suggestions for Most Effective Use

As you work with the tool to improve your critical consciousness, individually and collectively, and develop double-loop actions to increase educational equity, keep the following suggestions in mind:

- Remember to think specifically about identity categories, i.e. race, gender, religion, language, and SES. Avoid the temptation to describe characteristics of individuals in ways that reinforce stereotypes. This is true especially in the questions about power and patterns.
- When first working with the tool, use the questions verbatim. It will feel awkward at first and will most certainly be difficult. However, the tool is intended to help you disrupt patterns of thought and communication, and one highly effective way to do this is by using a replacement behavior. If you use the questions verbatim for a substantial amount of time, you will see the value of the practice, and also begin to learn how to use this approach with more of your own language and wording.
- Avoid groupthink. If everyone in the group is agreeing, particularly, if your group all shares one identity category, you will want to consider how someone from a different identity group might answer. It is very difficult to do this well, so push yourselves hard.
- Avoid staying where it is comfortable and/or affirming thoughts/contributions that stick with the status quo. While comfort and affirmation are highly valuable for certain purposes, when you want to increase equity you will need to confront some uncomfortable and challenging truths. If you have not gotten there yet, keep working to do so.
- Value the process of reflection, contemplation, and examination. Avoid wanting to give advice or seeking solutions. The tendency to do so is a cultural habit that perpetuates the status quo.

DAPP Tool for Equity-Mindedness

Equity-Mindedness is another term for Critical Consciousness, an active & persistent state of awareness that consistently seeks to unearth the taken-for-granted, and examine it for the ways that it masks institutionalized, systemic, and local inequality, privilege, and oppression (Radd & Macey, 2014).



I. Engage with DIFFERENCE and DISSONANCE.

- What are the opposing viewpoints in this situation that you prefer to avoid?
- Where do you see similarity in ways that might be masking difference?
- What information or facts cause you dissonance or discomfort?
- Who or what do you see as so illogical or unreasonable that you want to dismiss them/it without giving them/it any consideration?
- Where do you resort to “the rules” or “how we do things around here” to opt out of considering that we might change?

III. Look for how POWER is used & for whose benefit.

- Who has decision-making authority here?
- Who has the ear of the decision maker(s)?
- Who hangs around and expresses their opinion?
- Who can't seem to get their way?
- Whose voice/perspective is dismissed?
- Who regularly feels satisfied and/or empowered to influence decisions?
- Who regularly feels dissatisfied and excluded from decision-making?

IV. Identify and examine PATTERNS.

Patterns of Advantage and Disadvantage:

- ∞ Who consistently does well in this situation?
- ∞ Who consistently benefits from the current situation?
- ∞ Who consistently struggles or is at a disadvantage?

Patterns of Preference and Deficit Thinking:

- ∞ What is the desirable state in this situation?
- ∞ What is seen as normal versus abnormal? Natural versus unnatural?
- ∞ What is seen as “less than” or undesirable?
- ∞ How do these perspectives privilege and disadvantage individuals and groups?

II. Identify ASSUMPTIONS and improve them for accuracy.

Causal Assumptions:

- ∞ If looking back ask, why did this happen? If deciding for the future, ask, what do you anticipate will happen if we do it this way? In either case, how do you know? And whose lens are you using to make those predictions?
- ∞ What facts do you have to support these assumptions? What facts might you be missing? What credible sources might give you more complete or accurate information?
- ∞ How might you interpret the facts differently? How tightly attached are you to your interpretation? What is the outcome (for the situation, the relationship, equity) if you stay attached to your picture? What possible outcomes might occur if you revise your interpretation?
- ∞ What is the *theory of action* (the if...then... statement)? What assumptions are contained in that theory of action?

Prescriptive Assumptions:

- ∞ What do you believe *should* happen here? What other possibilities could be just as reasonable? What other possibilities do you think are unreasonable that someone else sees as reasonable?
- ∞ How tightly are you attached to your picture of what should happen?
- ∞ What is the outcome (for the situation, the relationship, equity) if you stayed attached to your picture?

Paradigmatic Assumptions:

- ∞ What do you see as plainly obvious? Perfectly logical? What do you see as the fundamental truths in this situation? What do you think is inarguable about this situation?
- ∞ Is it true? Is it absolutely, positively, unilaterally true? What are circumstances in which this may not be true?
- ∞ Who benefits when you see this as truth, and who is disadvantaged?
- ∞ Who are the populations or what are the perspectives for which this may not be true? How, if at all, do you dismiss their perspectives as untrue? How might you consider their perspectives to have validity?
- ∞ What is the outcome (for the situation, the relationship, equity) if you stay attached to your truth or logic? What possible outcomes might occur if you consider other truths and logics?



About the Author

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