Embracing Equity

4 Tips for a Strong, Equitable Virtual Experience

By Daisy Han
How do we facilitate virtual spaces that cultivate an emotional connection and meaningful, equity-centered learning?

During this global crisis, many of us are seeking ways to make the process of staying connected virtually easier. As an organization that has been committed to virtual learning spaces long before COVID-19, we at Embracing Equity have been approached for strategies and concrete tips on how to facilitate a strong, equitable virtual experience.

In an effort to share our own lessons and be helpful to this urgent need, I’ve compiled this guide of 4 tips that I hold dear when designing and facilitating virtual gatherings and learning spaces.

**Tip #1** Relationships Matter

**Tip #2** Silence is Golden

**Tip #3** Listen to Your Body and Mind

**Tip #4** You Belong Here
Time and again we hear from our participants that they were surprised how intimate and nurturing our virtual spaces feel. One of the concrete ways in which we create this relationship building space is by turning over the mic to the participants in the virtual space within the first 5 minutes of the session.

Our typical agenda across our virtual learning programs is to start with a welcome message from a facilitator and then engage in a round of more intimate group introductions. We prompt these introductions with an invitation for participants to share: 1) Name + Pronouns; 2) Where they’re currently located; 3) Their response to an icebreaker style question.

Icebreaker Questions

- What’s top of mind for you?
- Why did you specifically show up to today’s session?
- How are you taking care of yourself, your loved ones, and your community during this time? Or how would you like to?
- Where are you experiencing discomfort — that you’d like to confront?
- Share one aspect of your own equity reflection or practice — if you don’t have one, what would you like to commit to doing?

As an easy facilitation move, it’s great to ask participants at the beginning to share their introductions and then have them pass the virtual baton to someone else. This allows for the facilitator to fade into the background and be an active listener during the introductions while also encouraging each participant to be aware of who else is in the space and who hasn’t spoken yet. Furthermore, by doing so, we as facilitators are able to better understand each participants’ unique entry point as well as adapt the session to meet the group’s needs.
Community Agreements

We typically follow-up the introductions with our group agreements as it segues nicely from having heard everyone’s voices in the space to thinking about how we collectively want this space to take shape.

E | Embrace and interrogate discomfort
M | Monitor your reactions
B | Bring your whole self
R | Recognize your Impact
A | Actively stay engaged
C | Commit to your own lifelong learning
E | Expect and accept non-closure

These co-created community agreements help us be mindful of the ways in which our socialization and intersecting identities inform how we show up and interact. Here are some examples of community agreements you can use to start the conversation for your virtual space (inspired from resources such as Courageous Conversations and Circle of Trust Touchstones):

- Be present
- Assume good intentions and take responsibility for impact
- Keep your camera on when possible, mute when you’re not speaking
- Be able to express as much vulnerability as you are willing to offer
- Be open to another perspective
- Be ready to actively listen
- What is said here, stays here; what is learned here, leaves here
- Share airtime equitably (as mentioned above)

While we find it helpful to begin with agreements such as these, be sure to take all the time your group needs to allow for robust dialogue and collaboration so that the group can establish your unique agreements.

Keep in mind, the needs of the shared community will evolve over time. Thus, these agreements should be living documents that are revisited and/or revised at the start of each gathering. This foundational step is essential in building trust and co-ownership in virtual gatherings.
“I usually don’t speak up in meetings, in person or virtual. But when I joined the Embracing Equity online cohort, I felt like my voice was valued and that what I had to say was actually heard and incorporated in real time. I think having the slower pace made me feel like I could put my thoughts together and share meaningfully.” -Kristin S.

Before moving on to the next agenda item, a best practice I use from my days as a Wilderness First Responder is to ask: “Is anyone not ready to continue?” Reframing the question from “Is everyone ready to continue?” allows for space and silence to be able to hear if someone has any lingering questions or thoughts versus an assumed unanimous readiness to proceed.

According to Gallup, only 30% of workers strongly agree that their opinions count. Often, when we don’t speak up, it’s mainly due to fear of failure, ridicule, and embarrassment. This is a great barrier to productivity and well-being. One way to build confidence with sharing and being heard is to allow for silence.

Silence is truly golden. Give yourself permission as a facilitator to have luxurious moments of pause sprinkled throughout the session. You do not need to fill space. The silence is just as much a facilitator as you are.
Listen to Your Body & Mind

“The facilitators created a brave space that challenged our willingness to be vulnerable and allowed each cohort member to show up as they were in that moment.” - Luz C.

Wholeness is the awareness and practice of being attuned to our authentic and whole selves. At Embracing Equity, we see Wholeness as a necessary process to engage in anti-racism and anti-bias work because so much of our learned ways of being are based on compartmentalization. We begin and end all of our programs with this Wholeness practice.

Particularly in a time of heightened stress, it is critical to pay attention to our bodies. We experience things in our bodies: we fear, hope, react, constrict, and release in our body. In fact, psychobiology reveals that our deepest emotions involve the activation of the reptilian part of our brain that is reflexively protective. From the body’s viewpoint, safety and danger are visceral sensations. You feel safe or you don’t. Practicing Wholeness with the intention of focusing on our bodies and being able to bring consciousness to our reactions creates a greater freedom and serenity for each person to engage more fully.

Practicing Wholeness sets up the conditions for healing and alertness. Healing with other people in a shared practice, time, and reflection requires us to deeply regard and be in harmony with one another. Black, Indigenous, People of the Global Majority, and White bodies all need to learn to be more settled with one another in a way that we have all been conditioned not to be in our society. Our bodies guide and pick up on the energy of other bodies. Engaging in this Wholeness practice helps to settle our minds and nervous systems which encourages other minds and nervous systems to settle as well. This allows for a space — even virtually! — where a calm, open, and creative presence can become the foundation for a loving community.

As a facilitator, you can also use Wholeness to adaptively meet your group’s needs. For example, our team created a Wholeness script as a way to bring awareness to our thoughts and emotions and to return to presence and safety during this time of uncertainty. Consider using this script at the beginning of gatherings and team meetings to slow down and give everyone a chance to fully arrive into the present moment with their whole selves.
One of the most frequent pieces of feedback we receive on our virtual learning spaces is that it felt like the facilitators were also participants in the session. This is by design. Rather than having a director role in the interaction, we view the facilitator’s primary responsibility to be the one preparing the space.

I would say 80% of my work as a facilitator happens prior to anyone joining a virtual space. It is thinking through the design and details of the virtual learning experience; such as, the agenda, the participant experience, the flow of the meeting, the discussion questions, and the opportunities for silence. As you plan for a virtual meeting, remember that it will involve many people from different contexts that each have their own needs and vulnerabilities. What needs to be true to attend to these varied needs and vulnerabilities? If you don’t know or aren’t sure, it is perfectly okay to reach out ahead of time and ask.

Prepare Your Facilitation Team

- What strengths do you and your co-facilitator(s) bring to the session?
- How can you support each other?
- Who is in charge of facilitating each section?
- What is the expectation around co-facilitators stepping in during someone else’s designated time?
- Who is responsible for addressing instances of white fragility?
- What kind of reprieve space is available should a facilitator need to tend to their own emotions and wholeness?
When it comes time for the live facilitation, it is my job as a facilitator to guide the group’s interests and energy with as much directness as is needed, and as little interference as possible.

Ultimately, I want the prepared space to create a culture of belongingness and that means each individual has the agency to speak up, share, and ask for what they need when they need it. My greatest indicator of success as a facilitator is when participants express that they felt like they belonged in that space and that what they contributed and took away had value for them.

If your virtual space/meeting is a recurring one, then be sure to build off each session. Culture is formed through consistency and repetition. Create these rituals in your virtual sessions to allow for a groove to flow in your community.

**Conclusion**

As always, you know what needs to be at the center of all of these efforts to create a strong virtual experience: equity. Ensure you are designing, planning, and delivering a space that meets people where they are and allows them to advocate for what they need to thrive. In doing so, you are sure to have a strong virtual experience that embraces equity and our shared humanity.