



Towards More Equitable Public Sector Service Delivery: Using Critical Theories to Cultivate the Depth of the Equity Analysis Tool Facilitation

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Abstract

This paper provides a reflective account of the insights gained in the design of instructional resources intended to enhance attendee engagement of the Equity Analysis Tool (EAT) facilitation sessions. The EAT, implemented by the municipal Equity Team, serves as a framework for City staff to identify gaps in their respective work areas, thereby advancing a more equitable public sector service delivery. Applying a framework grounded in critical theories, I draw attention to how the learning experiences associated with the EAT facilitation are connected to broader social contexts as well as the diverse identities of the attendees themselves. I then discuss how I customized content to optimize learning and practical application of EAT and how I connected critical reflection to critical action to cultivate the depth of the EAT facilitation. I conclude by highlighting the significance of building trust among facilitators and attendees in a supportive environment conducive to transformative learning experiences.

Keywords: Adult Learning, Critical Theories, Equity Analysis Tool (EAT), Public Sector Service Delivery

Introduction

Efforts to improve the delivery of services within the public sector have persisted for nearly as long as governments have been delivering services to citizens (Heintzman & Marson, 2024). Since its 1995 introduction, Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) has embedded equity lens into public sector policy and practice (Government of Canada, 2025). As an analytical framework, GBA Plus examines the impact of multiple intersecting identity factors on individuals' experience with various issues, programs or initiatives, going beyond an exclusive consideration of sex and gender. The widespread implementation of GBA Plus across the Canadian public sector underscores the need for responsiveness to the diverse needs and circumstances of different populations in the

design and delivery of public sector services.

Drawn upon GBA Plus, the Equity Analysis Tool (EAT) represents a municipal initiative developed in response to the 2022 federal task force on service delivery (Prime Minister's Office, 2022). At the time of writing, I was appointed to support the facilitation of EAT sessions, which has been implemented and coordinated by the municipal Equity Team since 2023. EAT facilitations help City staff identify gaps in their respective work areas, thereby advancing a more equitable public sector service delivery framework.

While the sessions facilitated by the Equity Team have been perceived as beneficial by City staff, particularly in their introduction to the tool, a considerable shortcoming persists regarding the attendees' ability to effectively respond to the questions encompassed in the EAT. This limitation hinders their capacity to independently complete equity analyses in their service delivery following these sessions. As an educator with experience in curriculum development across a range of adult learning environments, I have been tasked with building out a suite of instructional resources designed to empower both the Equity Team and City staff across various service lines. The aim of these resources is to deepen the attendees' understanding and application of the EAT. This paper reflects on the insights gained from engaging attendees in EAT facilitation sessions.

The EAT and Its Facilitation

The EAT is predicated on five key areas of insight, collectively referred to as the ABCDEs of equity analysis. These areas encompass the following inquiries: 1. Assumption: what assumptions are we making? 2. Behind: who is at risk of being left behind? 3. Collaboration: who did we connect and collaborate with? 4. Data: what data sources have informed our analysis? 5. Evaluation: how are we evaluating? It is worth noting that, despite the sequential presentation of the ABCDEs, the equity analysis does not necessarily adhere to a static, linear process. Instead, new insights may emerge throughout the analytical process, reflecting the significance of viewing the equity analysis as a continuous part of all public sector service delivery.

While EAT facilitations are not explicitly categorized as diversity training, they share several parallels with diversity initiatives implemented across governments, corporations, organizations, and academic institutions, all of which aim to mitigate discrimination and ensure compliance with regulatory standards (Anand & Winters, 2008; Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; McCarter et al., 2024). In their 2018 work, *Why Doesn't Diversity Training Work? The Challenge for Industry and Academia*, Dobbin and Kalev illustrate five principal challenges inherent in diversity trainings. These challenges include: (a) the tendency for short-term educational trainings to fail in effecting individual behaviours, (b) the potential for some anti-bias workshops to unintentionally reinforce stereotypes, (c) the risk that diversity trainings may foster a false sense of confidence in participants, leading to complacency about their own biases, (d) the possibility of White participants

experiencing feelings of being marginalized or attacked, and (e) the observation that individuals often react defensively to efforts aimed at altering their entrenched values or beliefs.

As such, to promote sustained transformative change, researchers advocate for the implementation of pragmatic triple-loop learning outcomes: developing knowledge, shifting values, and practicing new skills (King et al., 2010; Devine et al., 2012). In light of these considerations, this reflection paper seeks to identify the challenges inherent in EAT facilitation within the Canadian public sector. Furthermore, it aims to provide recommendations for cultivating the required depth of equity analysis during these facilitation sessions, using a framework grounded in critical theories.

Applying Critical Theories to Adult Education

A commitment to aligning practice with theory enables adult educators to understand the complexities inherent in the teaching and learning processes. For practitioners who adopt a social justice orientation, critical theories provide an analytical lens for interrogating injustices and fostering informed social action. Guided by critical theories, I drew attention to how the learning experiences associated with EAT facilitations are connected to broader social contexts as well as the diverse identities of the attendees themselves. By applying critical theories to explore the complexities of the social structures in which attendees live and work, and the intersecting factors that shape individual learning trajectories, I aimed to address the needs of attendees while achieving the desired outcomes for more equitable service delivery. Understanding the influence of power in every service delivery has empowered me to design activities that could better prepare City staff to comprehend the implications of their work in advancing service delivery.

Critical theorists from Germany's Frankfurt school seek to interpret the world for social change (Collins, 2024). Although early Critical Theory (CT) reflects White, Eurocentric values, critical theories including critical race theory, feminism-based critical theories, post-colonial theory, provide interpretive frameworks that emphasize practical and subjective understandings of phenomena (Collins, 2024; Gnanadass & Merriweather, 2024; Jeffries, 2017). Aligning with my critical-constructivist onto-epistemological orientation, my efforts to weave critical theories into the resources developed to empower both the Equity Team and City staff across various service lines reveal the profound insights afforded by these frameworks, particularly in relation to "othered" identities. This theoretical lens provides a rigorous perspective for analyzing social conditions within the Canadian public sector, thus creating pathways to enhance equitable service delivery.

Critical theories have emerged in adult education as an essential lens for analyzing learning dynamics and environments (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Pioneers like Jack Mezirow (1997) and Paulo Freire (1970) lay the groundwork for integrating critical theories into adult education. Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory encourages

learners to “move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience” (p. 5). Put it simply, Mezirow highlights how adults challenge their assumptions through disorienting dilemmas and critical reflection. Therefore my intent in designing instructional resources is to facilitate learners’ engagement in critical reflection on their own assumptions as well as those held by others. Freire’s (1970) concept of conscientization underscores the political nature of adult education, framing it as a collective effort aimed at recognizing and addressing social injustices, rather than merely facilitating personal growth. Instead of adopting an authoritarian stance, adult educators learn from and engage with their students, embracing critique of their own actions. In this way, classrooms become democratic and participatory with active learning being the primary pedagogical approach (McLaren, 2000). In my efforts to develop instructional resources, I have intentionally sought to create an environment where counterhegemonic values and ideas can flourish.

Intersectionality

Though a comprehensive review of critical theories is beyond scope, the concept of intersectionality is indispensable for understanding needs and dismantling barriers in City services (Kaushik & Walsh, 2018). Intersectionality recognizes that intersecting identities are often weaponized to advantage some while disadvantaging others (Crenshaw, 1989). At its inception, Kimberlè Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* in 1989 to describe the compounded effects of race and gender as experienced by Black women, highlighting the resulting inequality they face due to their racial and gender identities. Extending beyond the mere recognition of overlapping categories of identity, intersectionality delves into the “interlocking systemic inequalities due to social structures” (Kaushnik & Walsh, 2018, p. 29). As such, intersectionality has emerged as a critical theory aimed at countering and mitigating the oppression experienced by equity deserving groups (EDGs). Intersectionality serves as a robust construct for both the facilitation of EAT and my efforts to develop instructional resources tailored for City staff.

Customizing Content to Optimize Learning and Practical Application of EAT

Research indicates that active participation in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) related trainings correlates with attendee’s prior knowledge of equity related concepts and whether the content reiterates previously understood materials (Gay, 2024; Chang et al., 2019). In this way, to facilitate a productive learning process, an equity analysis needs assessment was developed as an important component of the pre-work package to gauge attendees’ familiarity with equity and related concepts. Furthermore, the readiness to take actions is also evaluated preliminarily in the need assessment by asking

attendees to assess the level of skills and expertise on their team to undertake equitable service delivery.

Based on the results from the needs assessment, two pathways are available to best support learning and practical application of EAT. For service groups exhibiting a limited understanding of equity-related concepts and demonstrating hesitance in taking concrete actions, customized personas are used in the subsequent EAT facilitation session. Persona cards are specifically designed to support adult learners in identifying and reflecting on assumptions about their service users through emotionally resonant, experience-based learning while making it less personal. Stepping into others' shoes, particularly those who are likely to be members from EDGs, serves an effective pedagogical strategy to elicit emotional responses, which are integral to learning and often emerge unconsciously and unexpectedly throughout the learning process (Grams & Jurowetski, 2015).

An exercise that has proven helpful in developing a basic understanding of power relations involves showing the compounding effects of barriers that the assigned persona might meet trying to access the service. This is accomplished through the use of a virtual barrier meter, which quantitatively represents the spectrum of barriers from the lightest to the most severe. The next step for attendees is to draw a line on a larger poster board with one end marking as "most privileged – systems work in your favour" and the opposing end as "most marginalized – frequently face systemic barriers." By placing their persona card along the line, learners gain insights into the complexities of intersectionality because their personas may simultaneously experience advantages and disadvantages.

For service groups who are at a more advanced stage of learning, engaging them with novel content that fosters critical reflection marks the primary goal of the EAT facilitation. As noted by Valentin (2007), "reflection on personal experience forms a starting point in critical pedagogy" (p. 178). Given that these service groups possess a heightened familiarity with intersectionality, an identity wheel that allows them to critically reflect on their own identity and identities of those who work closely with them serves as an icebreaker activity during EAT facilitations. Attendees are asked to identify five people from their workplace with whom they share a close relationship. For each person, they are required to mark for each identity factor (race, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, etc.) that the person does not have in common with them. The areas with the fewest marks suggest the one they have least connection with. Following this exercise, attendees are provided an opportunity to reflect on three things they can do to cultivate a greater connection to these least connected identity areas and share their insights with the broader group. It is evidenced in Merriam and Bierema's 2014 work that exploring how an individual's positionality affects their experiences serves as an effective strategy to build a learning community which is conducive to critical thinking.

However, it is worth noting that an increased awareness of identities does not necessarily lead to behavioural change. This awareness risks of failing to produce any long-

term impact on discriminatory behaviour nor systemic inequities (Gay, 2024; Onyeador et al., 2021; Shahi et al., 2019). To support advanced-level service groups to identify potential barriers to equitable service delivery, particularly those systemic ones, an equity journey mapping activity has been found beneficial. This activity enables attendees to explore the ways in which their service users engage with the service at various stages. Simply put, attendees are encouraged to break down their service into distinct stages, including hearing about the service, engaging with the service, using the service, and receiving feedback. By critically reflecting on what works for their service users and what does not at each stage, attendees can foster a deeper understanding of their underlying assumptions.

Connecting Critical Reflection to Critical Action to Cultivate the Depth of the EAT Facilitation

Identifying assumptions serves as a starting point for engaging in critical thinking and action (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). To help attendees in examining their deeply held belief that inform their thoughts and actions, a range of activities designed to surface assumptions about service users and their needs have been introduced. We had success with providing sample assumptions and prompting attendees to match these with one or more personas generated specifically for the project. This approach was predicated on the understanding that unexamined assumptions may lead to the exclusion of certain personas receiving appropriate services. In this way, this activity encourages attendees to get past generic assumptions and engage with more intricate and specific issues.

Attendees stressed the need for tangible EAT takeaways to apply in the pursuit of equitable service delivery. It is easy to be committed to the idea that reflecting on assumptions constantly and being open to multiple perspectives. However, the sign of commitment is action (Brookfield et al., 2022). By questioning their assumptions, attendees are allowed to identify areas within their work that necessitate further data collection. Despite the diversity of data available to each service group has access to, a structured activity was developed to encourage attendees to share data points that would provide fresh insights into their assumptions in a different way. In this activity, attendees write down their assumptions on index cards and place them on the far right side of a pre-drawn line on a poster boarder. This line can be conceptualized as a spectrum, and attendees move these cards along the spectrum as they identify data to enhance their understanding of the assumptions. Subsequently, they note detailed information on sticky notes, which are affixed to a separate poster board labeled “what data do we have?” This process highlight areas requiring additional data, thereby motivating attendees to take actions. It also has the potential to encourage them to seek collaborative opportunities with both internal and external partners to enhance their information-gathering efforts.

Given the diverse experiences of individuals, fostering collaboration with both internal and external partners serves as an effective strategy to close gaps in service

delivery. Significant emphasis has been put on developing activities that enable service groups to identify their current collaborators as well as groups who can help engage communities at risk of being left behind. *The ladder of collaboration* has been proven to be a valuable exercise for service groups to examine various levels of collaboration with partners. This framework is structured as a ladder comprising six levels, progressing from level one “no collaboration” to level six “community-led.” The intermediate levels, “inform,” “consult,” “involve,” and “collaborate,” facilitate a critical reflection on the nature of their collaboration efforts. This framework enables an examination of whether these efforts are characterized by one-way communication, top-down decision-making or an equitable partnership in the decision-making process.

As Brookfield (2012) highlights, critical thinking is most effectively cultivated when grounded in specific events or experiences. That said, case studies are employed as pedagogical tools to facilitate understanding. Elicited from the case, scenario cards are provided to service groups, prompting them to place each card according to the appropriate rung of the ladder that they believe corresponds to the scenario presented. For example, a scenario card that I drew upon a case study about participating in a cultural event stating “event attendees expressed concerns but were never followed up by the City” may be placed on the rung of “consult,” indicating that although the City asked for community input, the subsequent decision-making process remained top-down, with control sitting with the City itself. To connect service groups’ critical thinking to critical action, an additional step in this activity involves an examination of potential barriers hindering process to higher levels of collaboration. It is important to highlight that these challenges are not exclusively related to a lack of willingness to collaborate. Rather, such barriers are often systemic and require service groups to offer more support to create greater access and participation.

Concluding Remarks

During my time working with the Equity Team, the concept of trust-building emerged as a prevalent theme among my colleagues. That explains the necessity for multiple informal conversations with the service group prior to the EAT facilitation. As articulated by Brookfield, “if you are going to bring people to a position of completely dismantling what they thought was a legitimate way of understanding the world, it always has to be relational” (Brookfield et al., 2022, p. xx). My observation also indicates that trust extends beyond the relationship between the facilitator and the attendees; it also encompasses the trust cultivated among attendees themselves. It is this reciprocal trust that fosters a supportive environment conducive to transformative learning experiences.

The performative nature of workshop-style EAT facilitations illustrates the inherent challenges in cultivating reciprocal trust within limited timeframe. In response to these challenges, the establishment of Equity in Service Delivery Community of Practice

has proven to be an effective way for fostering trust among service line teams. Additionally, panel discussions have been held for service groups to share key lessons, challenges, and the impactful changes they have made to better serve the people in their communities. Such initiatives underscore the importance of delving deeper to the nitty-gritty of practices and integrating equity considerations into their day-to-day work, rather than confining efforts to one time off, classroom-based interventions. As the Canadian public sector continues to represent the communities it serves and to develop equitable service delivery to ensure all groups can benefit, this reflection paper serves a dual purpose. It provides pedagogical tools to enhance engagement within EAT facilitation sessions and highlights the role of corporate culture in supporting equity. Such insights are integral to advancing the discourse on equity within public service frameworks.

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