

# Design for Dignity: Episode 286

**Elena:** If you've ever led a session on equity. And walked away wondering why didn't that land? This episode is for you. Hello friends. Welcome to the Bright Morning Podcast. I'm your host Elena Aguilar, and in each episode you will learn how to lead conversations and experiences that build connection and spark real change.

So today we are talking about one of the most essential and two often overlooked elements of transformational pd, which is designing for dignity. Because when people don't feel respected or seen or valued, learning just doesn't happen. Okay, let's get into it. So several years ago I attended a full day district led PD on cultural proficiency.

It was a high stakes moment. Educators across the district had been grappling with racial tension and inequity, and the district was finally investing in equity learning, and I was hopeful. Within something like 20 minutes, I felt my stomach drop. The facilitator never asked who we were or what we brought into the space.

They launched straight into a lecture. They had slides full of definitions and research findings and a whole lot of talking at us, and the only interactive element came when we were asked to complete a worksheet about our implicit biases alone silently. There was no conversation and we were told that we would report back after lunch.

There was no space to reflect, no room to ask questions, no acknowledgement of the very real identities and emotions that we were carrying into that room. And I remember thinking you are talking about equity, but I feel invisible. I wasn't alone at our table. No one spoke during lunch. People were just checking their phones.

And later when we were asked to share takeaways, people mumbled things like, oh, this was fine. But the session didn't fall flat because the content wasn't important. It fell flat because it wasn't designed for dignity. And here's what I have learned since then, dignity can't be an afterthought. It must be designed into every aspect of a PD experience from the first invitation to the final reflection.

And so today I want to share a simple but powerful tool that helps make that happen. This is the Human centered Design scan. So this is a set of five questions that I ask myself before facilitating any session, and they keep me honest. They help me notice where I might unintentionally exclude or ignore someone's humanity, and they give me concrete ways to design with dignity at the center.

So let's walk through those five questions, and as I do that, imagine how that earlier session that I just described could have gone differently if the facilitator had used this tool. So the first question is, whose voices are centered in this learning experience and whose are missing? So in that PD session that I just told you about, the facilitator's voice dominated the space.

There were no stories from educators of color. There were no quotes from them. There were no classroom examples. There was no co-facilitating. There was just one perspective, and that sends a message whether we mean it to or not. The second question is, what assumptions am I making about what participants know, believe or value?

So that session assumed that we were all on the same page, that we were ready for a certain kind of content delivered in a certain kind of way, but we weren't. Some folks were new to equity work, others were deeply immersed. Some were coming from different school cultures, different experiences, and none of that was acknowledged.

The third question, how might I affirm people's identities through stories, language, examples, or norms? There were so many missed opportunities in that session. Even a simple question like what identities are shaping how you enter today's learning could have opened the space, or there could have been a norm, like honor the lived experience in the room and that could have given permission to speak freely, and none of that was present.

The fourth question is. Where is there space for participants to share their experiences and expertise? And there wasn't. And that was a huge loss because that room was full of people who had decades of experience navigating these issues in real classrooms with real kids. But the design treated us like blank slates.

And people shut down. All right. The final question is, how will participants know that they are valued, respected, and expected to contribute? One sentence could have changed the tone of that day. Something like, you are not here to be

fixed. You are here because your voice and experience matter, and we are building this learning space together.

That one move could have opened hearts and minds. So this scan, using these questions, takes about five minutes and it can shift everything. It helps you see your design through the eyes of those who will experience it, and it helps you catch the things that might unintentionally cause harm or silence voices.

So let me give you an example of what this looks like when it's done well. Earlier this year I led a session with a group of instructional coaches working in a rural district with shifting demographics. The topic was also equity, but before we talked about definitions or models, we started with stories.

So I asked, what are the lived experiences that shape how you show up as a coach? One woman shared how she'd grown up in a bilingual household, but had been told to just speak English. When she started teaching another, shared how being one of the only black educators in her district made her feel both visible and invisible.

We spent the first hour in storytelling, not slides. And by the time we moved into frameworks and strategies, people weren't just listening, they were engaged, they were ready. And that's what Dignity does. It builds the foundation for transformation. So here is your challenge this week before your next PD session, pause.

Ask yourself those five questions. Don't just design for content, design for humanity, and then make one shift. Maybe it's starting with a story. Maybe it's opening space for participants to reflect. Maybe it's just changing her language so that people feel respected. Whatever it is. Try it and see what opens.

If this approach speaks to you and you want more tools to design and facilitate powerful adult learning, then check out the PD workshop. It is one of my favorite offerings, and it is the space where we practice exactly this kind of transformation. You will find the link in the show notes along with links to the art of virtual facilitation and our free community webinars.

Thank you for being here with me today, and if this episode helped you think differently about PD design, I hope you'll share it with a colleague. If you are listening via podcast, then take a moment to rate and review the show. It really helps others find their way to this work. And if you're watching on YouTube and

something clicked for you, give this video a like and send it to someone who facilitates learning.

And if you're not already watching there, then come and join us. There is a link in the show notes. All right, friends, LesLee Bickford is the podcast producer and Stacey Goodman does the sound engineering. Take care and be well everyone.