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# Board 237: Designing a Community of Transformation for Justice: A Design Case Capturing the Beginnings

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# Designing a Community of Transformation for Justice: A Design Case Capturing the Beginnings

The purpose of this paper and poster is to detail the development of our diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ)-centered Community of Transformation (CoT), GATHER (Gathering Action Together: Harbinegers of Equity Revolution), through a design case. Design cases are a genre of writing that shares a vivid and vicarious narrative account of design knowledge and intentions within specific situations [1]. We offer this design case on the initial development of a CoT for others interested in using speculative fiction and futurisms to design for transformational organizational change guided by radical hope.

This design case was written by a team of designers: a professor of engineering education research, a learning sciences professor with expertise in learning and design, a higher education researcher, two doctoral candidates, and an undergraduate engineering and gender studies student. Throughout this design case we use the term "we" to indicate those involved at that point in time of the design process, as some of the designers joined later in the implementation of the project.

Though our team includes some diversity in terms of disability, sexuality, gender identity, racial identity, academic rank and position, and discipline, we acknowledge that as a team primarily comprising white women and nonbinary people, we come from a place of privilege in society. We continuously work to critically reflect on our intersectional identities and leverage our privilege to work towards greater justice, as well as create an inclusive community. In telling the story of our design, we share ways we have embodied this value.

In this design case, we first describe the context in which we designed the GATHER CoT, including some early ideas that shaped our focal narrative, which illustrates key decisions we made in the process of designing an arts-based kickoff event that we hoped would begin forming trust and community, the bedrock of GATHER. While we made *many* design decisions, in this case, we foreground those related to developing arts-based activities in our kickoff events.

## Context

The GATHER project aims to increase the effectiveness of and sustain organizational change efforts aimed at DEIJ goals by instigating a cross-institutional, DEIJ-centered CoT. Ultimately, GATHER aims to foster commitment to and capacity for creating DEIJ-oriented systems change in STEM higher education. The idea for creating this CoT came about through collaboration after three of us had been working together to understand power dynamics on institutional change teams. We met when working on our individual grants aiming to "revolutionize" engineering education. In discussing the challenges and barriers to change that were seldom made public, we began an initial project that investigated the ways power and privilege helped or hindered change in engineering education on these institutional change teams [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]. This work positioned us to help others through the change process and overcome challenges faced by change agents engaged in similar work. Our academic backgrounds in engineering education, higher education, and learning sciences meant that we brought these perspectives into our initial planning of GATHER, formalized as a framework integrating theories of power, organizational change, and situated learning [2].

The goal of the CoT is to broaden participation and support DEIJ-focused outcomes in STEM education at higher education institutions across the United States. To reach this goal, we envisioned using storycrafting, remixing, and speculative design to sustain change agents' efforts in making STEM higher education systems more equitable and just. Specifically, we conjectured that speculative design narratives, which intentionally critique the present, can build commitment to making change; that remixing, which involves making changes to existing narratives, can support members to envision and analyze near-term changes and outcomes; and that futurisms, which involves crafting new, visionary narratives, can support members to hold tight to DEIJ commitments even as they face barriers.

We share how we developed and implemented the kickoff events of the CoT. Mindful of how easily on-the-fly decisions get lost, we decided to record our meetings (both leadership team meetings and CoT events)—in addition to taking notes and documenting designs—to ensure our memory related to design decisions was accurate.

**Envisioning and planning an arts-based kickoff**

While our original vision included creative practices (speculative design, remixing), it was not until we began planning the first kickoff event that the arts came clearly into focus. We attribute this to several things. First, a few of us commonly engage in art practice ourselves, such as painting and ceramics. Second, storycrafting, remixing, and speculative design seemed rather inert until we imagined activities that felt accessible; these activities included our own precedent, in our teaching, reading, and experiences, and overwhelmingly, they featured the arts. Finally, as we continued to read, we found inspiration in quotes by Maxine Greene, who eloquently encapsulated our desire to use the arts to explore new directions and help us see our current world in a new way [7, p. 123]:

> At the very least, participatory involvement with many forms of art enables us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed.…When we see more and hear more, it is not only that we lurch, if only for a moment, out of the familiar and taken-for-granted but that new avenues for choosing and for action may open in our experience; we may gain a sudden sense of new beginning, that is, we may take an initiative in the light of possibility.

While we initially planned a hybrid kickoff, we were concerned about our ability to organize an in-person event in a short timeline. We decided to hold a virtual kickoff, and we briefly summarize some of the decisions that shaped the space in which we designed an arts-based kickoff event: First, we chose to use a Canvas Free-for-Teachers account to organize activities and resources because some were familiar with Canvas and because it required no institutional permissions or cost to use. Next, we decided to hold the kickoff as a distributed event, spanning a little more than a week, bookended by two synchronous sessions. We had previously planned to include virtual participants, in part because of discussions within the team about one member's disability and others' young children impacting their capacity to travel. When quickly putting together a website with a save-the-date, we used one member's artwork in part because it was handy and carried no copyright issues (Figure 1). We overlaid these images with messages

related to the project, and these inspired us to consider other ways to spread the word about the GATHER project. We discussed sending postcards, and we made buttons to distribute at a conference.



Figure 1. Screenshot from our initial website

Once we made the decision to host the kickoff virtually, we decided to send welcome kits to members. We generated many ideas as a menu of possible activities to decide what to include in the welcome kits. For instance, we came up with activities developing protest art, rest, writing a renga poem, visible mending, watercolor painting, an ecofeminism activity, an I poem, a LEGO challenge, and more. We drew upon our experiences teaching design courses, experiences in other projects, books of creative activities, and readings from a special issue on speculative education in the *Journal of the Learning Sciences* (Volume 32, issue 1) to come up with ideas. Vanessa began the process of creating the welcome kits to mail to participants (Figure 2). We included art making tools (e.g., watercolor pencils, embroidery thread, fabric, transfers, paper, glue stick, colored pencils), collage materials (e.g., cutouts of people, phrases), and zine templates (e.g., changemaker zine, how to use watercolor pencils zine, a harbinger zine).
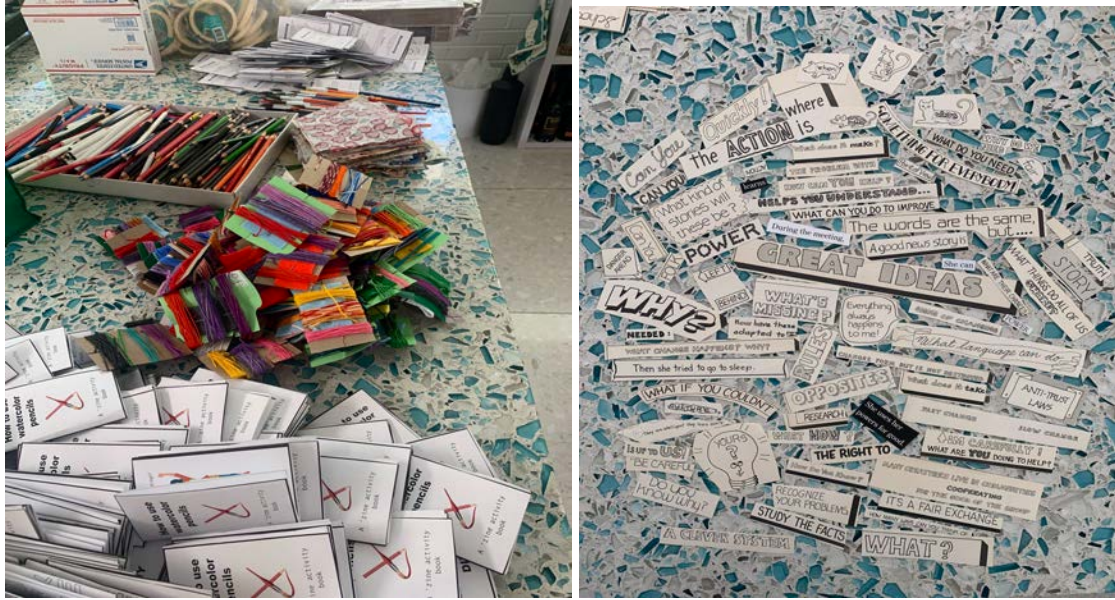
Figure 2. Materials for the welcome kits

As we considered the aims of the kickoff, we knew we wanted to get participants excited about engaging in the community, to build a sense of community, and to show them that the GATHER CoT was going to be different from typical academic communities because of its focus on the arts and storycrafting. But, we were also mindful that participants might be skeptical about the value of such activities. To address this concern, we developed a template for activities with the following headings, and we used this same template for the arts-based activities that we could defend as relevant:

- What is the activity and why are we doing it?
- How do you do it?
- What do you turn in?
- Looking for some inspiration?

For instance, we decided to build a few activities around zines—small magazines made by folding a single sheet of paper. We choose to use zines in part because of their use in protests, counter culture, the arts, and activism. Zines are usually handmade, then copied and distributed. In one zine activity, we asked participants to make a zine about themselves. We explained:

> In this activity, we are asking you to make a zine about yourself. We are doing this because we want to begin forming a trusting community with members who can support each other to take risks in order to make change. Some of these activities might push you out of your comfort zone. As we remind our students often, that can happen during growth and learning.

We included links and images with instructions for folding a zine, along with a set of templates they could use (Vanessa created templates on using watercolor pencils, remixing, and being a harbinger for change and Nadia created a template for a per-zine (personal zine, Figure 3) and one focused on institutional change). After creating the per-zine template, Nadia piloted it with

PhD students in a workshop and faculty in a seminar. While it worked well, we decided to also open the activity up further to encourage creativity. We explained, "We have noticed that people tend to be a little more creative if they start with a blank sheet of paper, but that can feel daunting for some."

We asked participants to share a photo if they were willing and to respond to reflective prompts:

- How did it feel to create a zine?
- In what ways (if at all) did the zine communicate your perspective, positionality, and identity?

Finally, we included a list of resources, such as websites explaining how to make zines (e.g., https://docs.google.com/document/d/11Lc8s3w5HLrs8ekKiIGrbxNjVUV591MRvLdIOp_5fiA/edit), a YouTube video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qu0NXYIuY-0) discussing how they find inspiration for their own 'zines, an archive of zines from the *Solidarity! Revolutionary Center and Radical Library*, and examples of scholars who use zines to supplement their academic research (https://www.stephanietjones.com/zines).
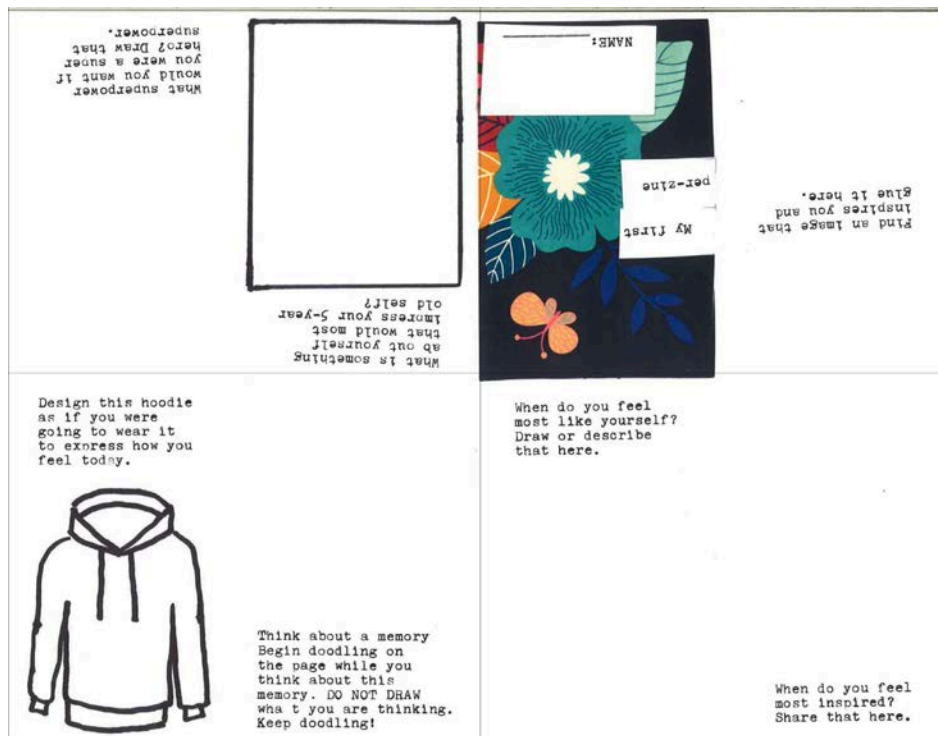


Figure 3. Template created by Nadia for the per-zine activity

Another key design decision we foreground relates to being intentional about the scholars whose work we included. We aimed to center BIPOC scholars, while leveraging our experiences with privilege and oppression to learn and support others as we collaboratively work to make change. For example, we highlighted Indigenous and Black scholars through an activity based on our

reading of Tachine and Thomas' work [8], "Early Dawn Toward Imagining Worlds." We have since focused two media club meetings on Tricia Hersey's book, "Rest is Resistance" [9]. We are also looking for Black and Indigenous collaborators to work with us to continue to develop our CoT and associated activities.

**Enactment: Arts-based approaches in the kickoff events**

We held the virtual kickoff event in October 2023, attended by 55 members. Even before the event, we heard from participants as they received the welcome kits. One participant emailed us to let us know that it made her day and that she was excited about the formation of our group. We were hopeful that we were setting the tone for the kickoff events. Another participant was also excited about "The cool stuff in the box. I was interested in cutting things up and moving them into different positions to spark various ideas."

While some participants were excited about arts-based activities, others expressed that the creative activities were stressful for them, as it was such a different way of thinking and creating. "I still find these creative activities stressful, but I'm getting better at pushing through." Others described feeling open to the process, with one participant drawing a parallel between the arts-based approaches and their equity-oriented change project. They described that they both take time and require some "patience and openness to allow things to unfold, emerge, and build."

The kickoff event included activities to support community building: the Fast Friends protocol fostered trust amongst members [10], [11]; creating harbinger trading cards (Figure 4, like baseball cards) tasked members with positioning themselves as bringers of change by creating artwork on the front to depict their change work and information about their work on the back.



Figure 4. Examples of harbinger trading cards; on the left, the image emphasizes connections across groups; on the right, biases that mask privilege.

During the kickoff, we wrote a collective renga poem (Figure 5) that we feel helps illustrate how the arts can help inspire and empower us. In writing a renga poem, each poet writes a stanza following a specified format [12]. During the activity, we encouraged participants to first read the collaborative renga at the end of the Tachine and Thomas paper [8] and then to create a stanza in one of the forms (three or two lines):

- For those writing 5-7-5s, focus on what positions you as ready to and needing to make change in academia
- For those writing 7-7s, focus on the vision, on futures made possible because of successful, consequential action in academia

We then compiled the renga and took turns reading stanzas to hear the completed poem. We collaboratively wrote this renga poem as one way to form a sense of being part of a collective CoT. Our renga is a metaphor and evidence that even if our individual contributions feel smaller or less developed, collectively, they form a compelling and rich vision of change. We are including our collaborative renga poem in this paper to highlight the emotions members experience as we work as institutional change leaders. We hope that arts-based approaches will foster a culture in higher education that promotes DEIJ. One of the parts of the renga poem said it well, "Freedom to learn from my space/To grow and thrive in our space."

**Conclusion and future work**

Since the kickoff events in October 2023, we have held art teas and media clubs, meeting once or twice a month. These interactions have provided opportunities for members to share the expertise they have developed as members of institutional change leadership teams (e.g., NSF ADVANCE, RED, INCLUDES, and IUSE leadership teams) with each other, as well as learn more about how arts-based activities and storycrafting practices can guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of systems change efforts in STEM education.

Early participant feedback indicates enthusiasm for the CoT. While comfort with the arts-based work varied from slightly uncomfortable to extremely enthusiastic, participants expressed an openness to trusting the process and they were excited for the potential. We will continue these meetings, including an in-person event in April, in order to inspire and develop a stronger community of engaged harbingers who are better equipped to make lasting changes on their campuses. We plan to continue to engage in arts-based approaches including remixing, speculative design, and futurisms. We hope that this design case helps others learn from us so that we all can, as stated in our renga poem, "grow and thrive" together as we make transformative equity-focused changes in our institutions. We end this paper with another part of the poem: "radically different/ creating a new future." We hope that a radically different approach will help us envision and enact a new, equitable and just future in higher education.

## Flames of Unity: CONVERGing for Change

Sick of it. Sick of
it. Sick of it. Sick of it.
We can do better, I hope!

Radically different
Creating a new future

Culture matters most
When inspiration is needed
Creativity follows

Move queerly to agitate
A changeful academy

Belonging matters
That is why we need to change
So everyone belongs

Just learning environments
Uplift and empower us

I stand from inside
The new paradigm of hope
And love and respect.

Freedom to learn from my space
To grow and thrive in our space

When we are ready
We are together as one
With our own richness

Ev'ry student has a place
To get support, grow, and learn

Institutional,
Structural power, I wield
With hope, love, and grace

Palm in palm here invited
We stride forward united

Change will happen here
When we listen to others
And value what's said

Dignity, sovereign justice.
Community together

Why wait? Make it now
Time will pass on regardless
Everyday is a chance

Different wavelengths. Without
A distortion. Amplified.

We know many people
We have influence, and now
Is the time to change

Osmotic pressures balanced
Easily we all exchange

Winds of change do blow,
Gathering strength from our roots,
Kindling hearts aglow.

Ready for creative range
Let's experience great change

Gathering our dreams,
Kindling flames of unity,
Hope for what can be.

Everyone is thriving now
No matter who they are

Gather 'round the fire,
Kindle sparks of new ideas,
Radical hope burns.

Collaborate and cherish
Sustainable life and earth

Figure 5. Collective renga poem written during a kickoff event.

## Acknowledgements

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