



Cultural Organizing

Working for justice at the intersection of art, activism, education, and culture

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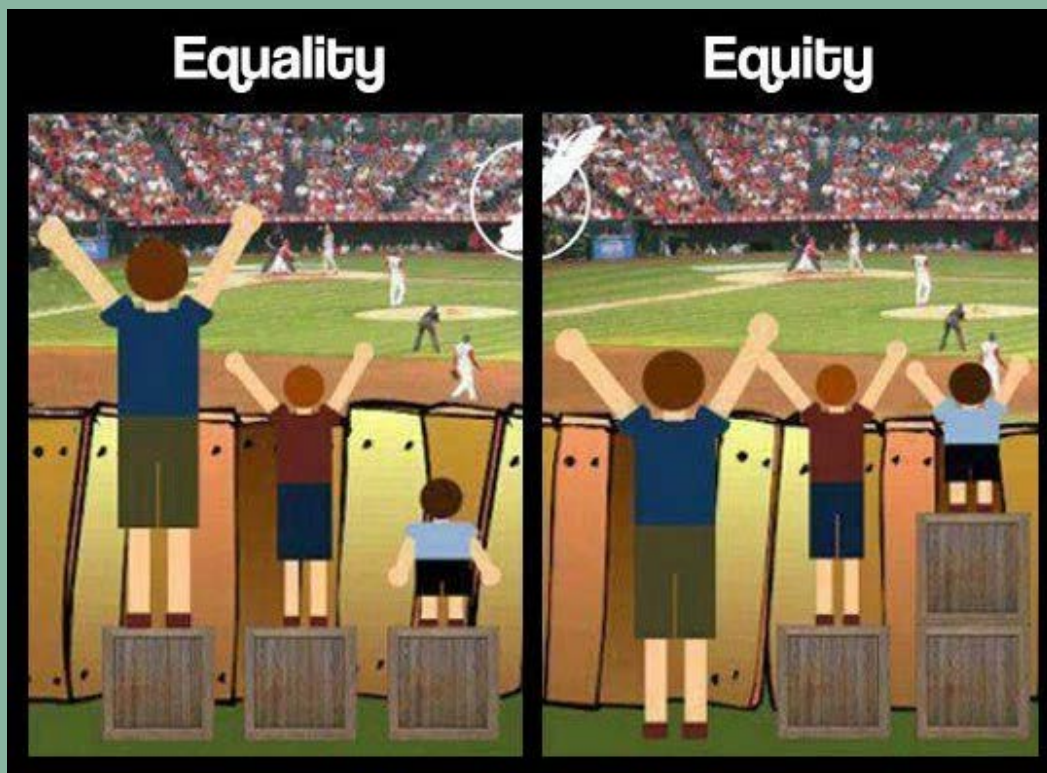
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The problem with that equity vs. equality graphic you're using

October 29, 2016 Paul Kuttner Post Equality, Equity, Infographics, Justice, Metaphors, Symbols

[NOTE: November 1, 2016. This post has been updated based on the new things I've learned about these images since posting the original article.]

I was doing some work for a colleague at the [Family Leadership Design Collaborative](#), and she gave me a challenge: redesign the "equity vs. equality" graphic that's been circulating on the web. You've probably come across a version of this graphic yourself. There are a bunch of iterations, but basically it shows three people trying to watch a baseball game over the top of a fence. The people are different heights, so the shorter ones have a harder time seeing. I've included the original image above, by [Craig Froehle](#).

In the first of two images, all three people have one crate to stand on. In other words, there is “equality,” because everyone has the same number of crates. While this is helpful for the middle-height person, it is not enough for the shortest and superfluous for the tallest. In contrast, in the second image there is “equity” — each person has *the number of crates they need* to fully enjoy the game.

The distinction between equity and equality is an important one. For example, if we're talking about **school funding**, advocating for equality would mean ensuring that all schools had the same amount of resources per pupil (an improvement in most cases, to be sure). On the other hand, advocating for equity would mean recognizing that some schools — like those serving students in low-income Communities of Color — will actually need more resources (funding, experienced teachers, relevant curriculum, etc.) if we are going to make a dent in the educational disparities that have come to be known as the **“achievement gap.”**

The problem with the graphic has to do with where the initial inequity is located. In the graphic, some people need more support to see over the fence because they are shorter, an issue *inherent to the people themselves*. That's fine if we're talking about height, but if this is supposed to be a metaphor for other inequities, it becomes problematic. For instance, if we return to the school funding example, this image implies that students in low-income Communities of Color and other marginalized communities need more resources in their schools because they are *inherently less academically capable*. They (or their families, or their communities) are metaphorically “shorter” and need more support. But that is not why the so-called “achievement gap” exists. As many have argued, it should actually be termed the **“opportunity gap”** because the problem is not in the abilities of students, but in the disparate opportunities they are afforded. It is rooted in a history of oppression, from colonization and slavery to **“separate but equal”** and **redlining**. It is sustained by **systemic racism** and the country's ever-growing **economic inequality**.

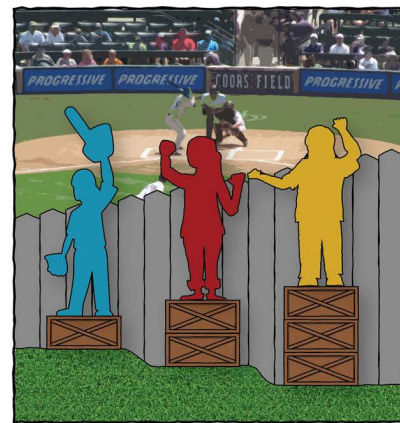
This metaphor is actually a great example of **deficit thinking** — an ideology that blames victims of oppression for their own

situation. As with this image, deficit thinking makes systemic forms of racism and oppression invisible. Other images, like the one of **different animals having to climb a tree**, or of **people picking fruit**, suffer from the same problem. How would we make these root causes more visible in our “equity vs. equality” image?

Well, if we began with the metaphor of the fence, this would require making clear that the reason some people have more difficulty seeing than others is not because of their height, but because of the context around them. Below is a sketch of this idea. In this image, some people are standing on lower ground (a metaphor for historical oppression) and are trying to see over a higher fence, a metaphor for present-day systems of oppression. (I also put a hole in the fence, made by the person on the right, to symbolize the **creative and often subversive ways** that people find to work around systems and get some of what they need.)

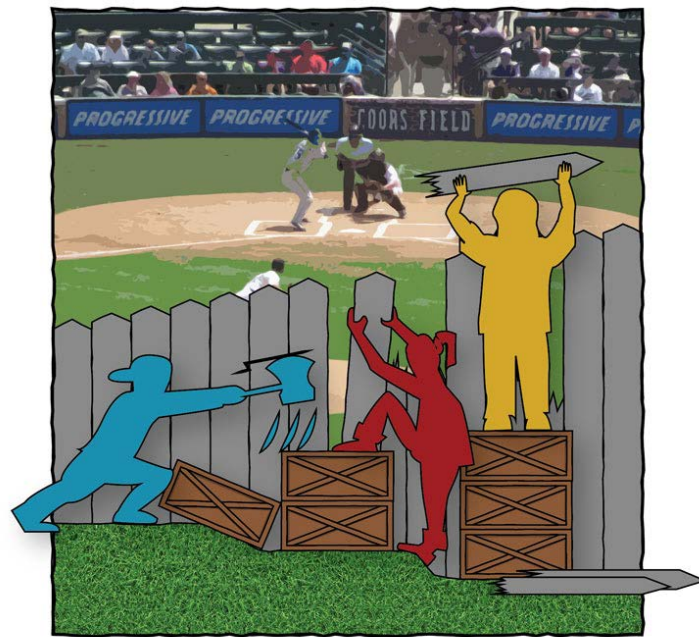


EQUALITY



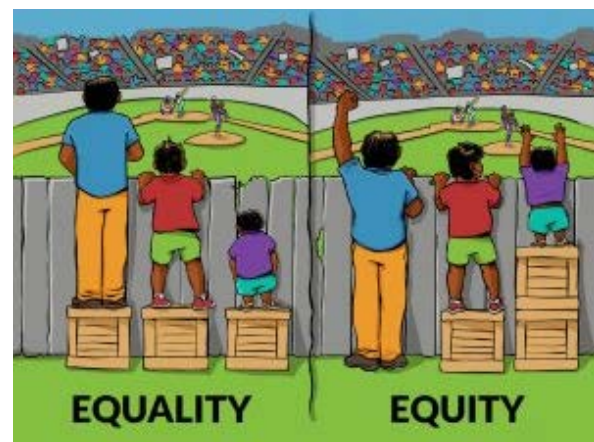
EQUITY

However, I still don't love this new version, because nothing is being done here to address the real problem: the fence. So I drew this third image for fun. Though by this point it's losing a lot of the original images nice simplicity.

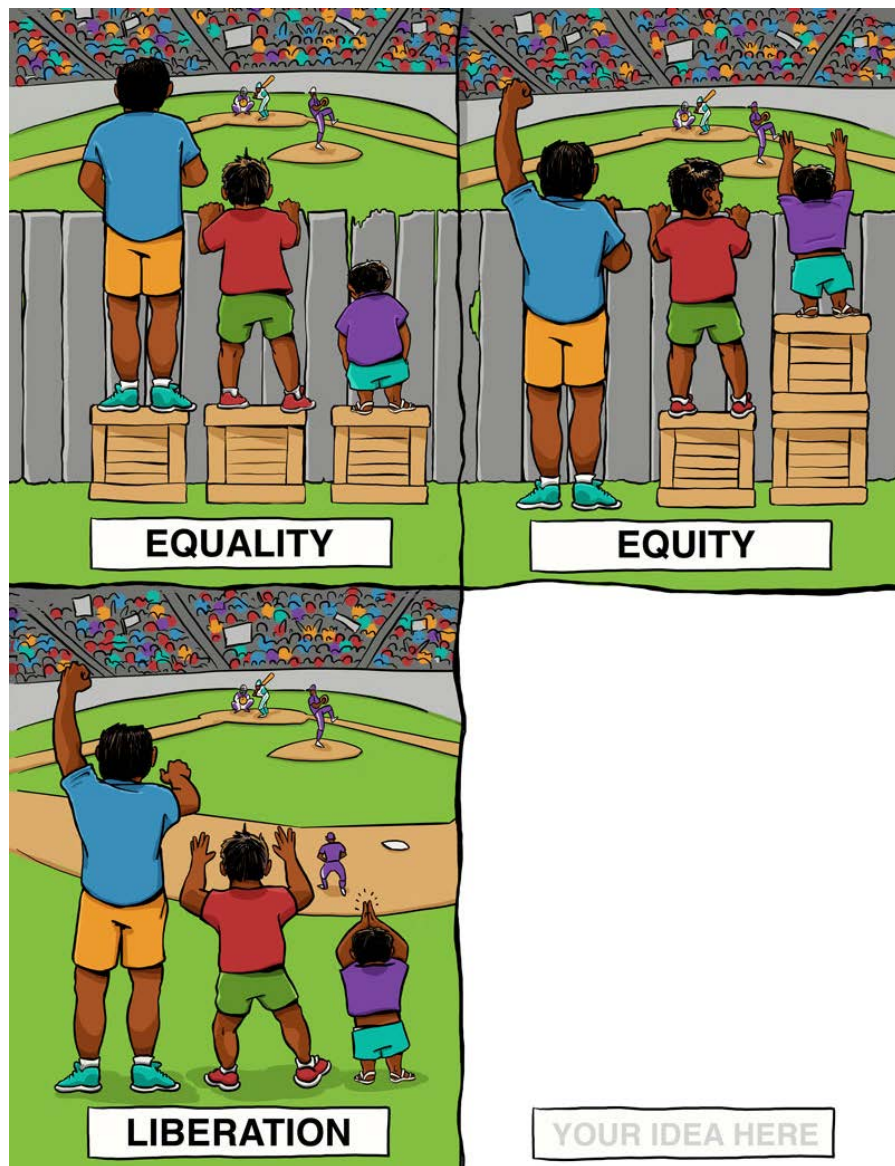


JUSTICE

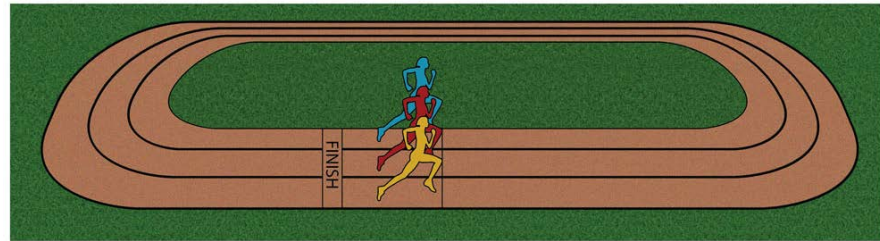
If you want to play around with this metaphor yourself, check out [the 4th Box toolkit](#). Recently, the people at the [Center for Story-Based Strategy](#) and the [Interaction Institute for Social](#)



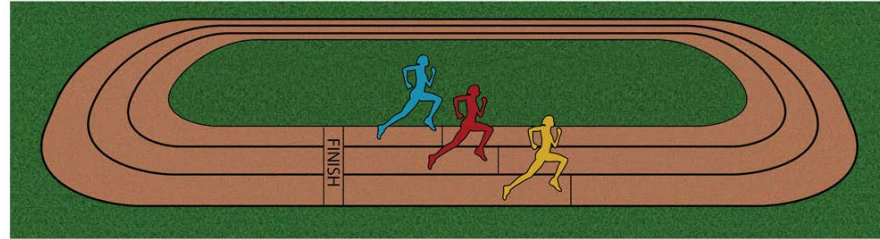
[Change](#) worked with artist [Angus Maguire](#) to recreate the fence image, producing the beautiful version to the right. It went viral, and they noticed a lot of people remixing the image to expand on the concepts. So they collaborated with Maguire again to create an adaptable visual toolbox, which makes it easy to create your own image in the “4th box” as shown below. They’ve been using it to inspire both [in-person and online dialogues](#).



I still see a lot of drawbacks to the core metaphor, however, so I've been on the lookout for others. One I've heard, which I think works better, references runners on a racetrack. On an oval track, the outer lanes are actually longer than the inner lanes. If everyone started at the same place, some would have to run farther than others. So, naturally, we start runners at different places along the track. Here's a mock-up of this metaphor, though it assumes that you already know about the different lengths of each lane:



EQUALITY



EQUITY

Beyond this, I haven't had any major breakthroughs, and the idea of life as a "race" isn't very appealing to me. Fortunately, I was not the only one trying to figure this out. [Meyer Memorial Trust](#) and [Northwest Health Foundation](#) had similar concerns, so they launched the [Equity Illustrated](#) contest, asking Oregonian artists to take up the challenge.

First place winner [Salomé Chimuku](#) rejected the simple metaphoric approach all together, noting that "equity isn't about watching baseball." Instead she offers [a series of cartoon portraits](#) of friends, with quotes from each illustrating a different aspect of equity. The result has the quality of a conversation. Here's a sample. You can download the whole [pdf HERE](#).

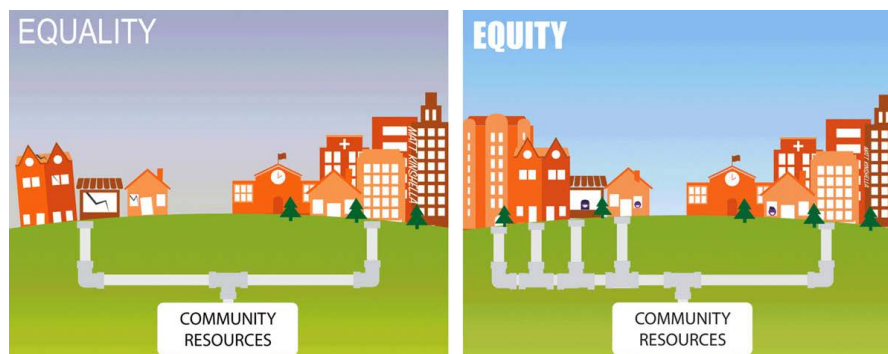
"Equity is a home. Not like a physical house
...but rather a home. Cause that's
more metaphorical to a sense of belonging and stuff,
yeah? Yeah."



"We have to *build* towards equity. It takes both;
people using their privileges and others using
their experiences."



The third place illustration, from [Matt Kinshella](#), is also pretty great. It keeps the simplicity of the fence image, but puts aside the baseball metaphor for a more concrete example — one close to my heart as someone invested in community work.



It may seem that I am reading too much into these images. Certainly they were all created with the best of intentions. But metaphors are important. They help us understand new ideas by referencing things we already know. At the same time, they shape our experience, opening us up to some ideas while closing us off to others. The mental shorthand we use to understand “equity” will affect how we go about fighting for it.

In the spirit of keeping the conversation going, I'll end with this image from Sam Killermann, which I find pretty amusing, and which [you can buy in poster or t-shirt form](#).



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