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*Reflections on Practice*

# Creating Climates Resistant to Sexual Harassment: Reflections for Prosocial, Equity-Focused Educational Development Trainings

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## Abstract

Sexual harassment is a prominent, entrenched problem in higher education spaces: research reveals that 58% of women faculty and staff have experienced sexual harassment (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 56). In this reflection, the authors emphasize the importance of training academic leaders as a population that can leverage their roles toward creating institutional climates resistant to sexual harassment and other social inequities. Using an eight-hour workshop at the University of Michigan as a case study, the authors offer four key reflections for educational developers working to develop participant capacity toward organizational and social change.

**Keywords:** sexual harassment training, organizational climate, social change, academic leaders, equity-focused educational development

In this essay, we introduce reflections from an eight-hour in-person workshop combining research, theatrical case studies, and design thinking exercises entitled *Creating Climates Resistant to Sexual Harassment: A Toolkit for Academic Leaders* (*CCR2SH*). Commissioned by the University of Michigan's (U-M) upper administration and developed by the Theatre Program at U-M's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, the workshop invited academic leadership teams to participate from across our decentralized Research 1 university in academic year (AY) 2019–2020. (While this program continued in a hybrid format following the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article details the program in its initial in-person design.) These teams were made up of three to five individuals who held formal or informal leadership roles in their unit, including the provost's office, various deans and their cabinet members, and many departments (chairs, directors of undergraduate/graduate studies, chief admins, etc.). The day was broken into three parts. The first offered a research overview paired with two theatrical monologues designed to support participants in reflecting on differential incidence rates and impacts of sexual harassment. The second introduced two more theatrical scenarios to explore the individual and structural responsibilities leaders have in cultivating unit climates resistant to sexual harassment. In the third, teams moved through a series of design thinking exercises to brainstorm structural changes they could make to reshape their

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unit's climate. Before and after the session, participants were invited to fill out a questionnaire evaluating their knowledge and perceptions of sexual harassment. We hosted four of these retreats in a three-month period; over 200 academic leaders participated.

This training allowed us as educational developers a novel opportunity to apply principles of learning and organizational change to a social problem that is often handled in institutional contexts as an issue of legal compliance. While we were in conversation with U-M's Office for Institutional Equity (now called the Equity, Civil Rights, and IX Office), we had a broader mandate: rather than encouraging community members to merely comply with the law (an important *piece* of prevention), we prompted leaders to expand their understanding of their own responsibility to shape institutional climate. Because we know many educational developers work to increase faculty and administrator capacity to make long-lasting change, we offer four key reflections that provide readers with practical thoughts on how to encourage participant growth in ethical, prosocial ways. Through these, we hope educational developers can expand their own practical toolkit and design capacity to contribute to more equitable educational environments in all kinds of different arenas.

## Reflection 1: Give participants time to *plan*

Sexual harassment is a prominent, entrenched problem in higher education spaces: The most comprehensive meta-analysis to date on the prevalence of sexual harassment reveals that 58% of women faculty and staff have experienced sexual harassment, with women who have multiple marginalities (e.g. Women of Color or non-straight women) experiencing even higher rates of harassment (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 44, 56). Research has shown that the problem of sexual harassment cannot be solved by merely finding individual perpetrators who commit bad acts and rooting them out of the university. Rather, organizational climate (i.e., "the shared perceptions within an organization of the policies, practices, and procedures in place") plays a primary role in facilitating and enabling harassment; it is the most potent predictor of whether sexual harassment will occur in a workplace (Johnson et al., 2018, p. 121). The problem, therefore, is how to shift an organizational climate from one that *tolerates* sexual harassment to one that actively *resists* it. The related challenge then becomes, who holds the responsibility to enable that change?

While all community members should contribute to organizational climates that resists sexual harassment, not all have the same access to levers for change nor the same responsibility for effecting it. Academic leaders have an outsized responsibility for creating change, (some) access to levers for effecting change, and (more) power to make large-scale changes happen. In our experience, academic leaders, like most faculty, are largely well-meaning and willing to work hard, but have limited knowledge of or practical training on what they can do in their roles to tackle this problem. By receiving tailored attention in this workshop, it was our goal to give them time to put their efforts into brainstorming and planning different ways for their communities to be.

While the first half of *CCR2SH* focused on knowledge and skill-building related to sexual harassment and its disproportionate impacts (for instance, Women of Color receive more sexual harassment than white men and women, and Men of Color; LGB individuals receive more sexual harassment than their heterosexual counterparts), the last half of the day involved leadership teams doing visioning work together (Johnson et al., 2018). We started that process by introducing them to eight levers to affect climate: environment, expectations, interaction, language, modeling, opportunities, routines, and time (adapted from Ritchhart, 2015). After a short set of examples on how a leader might leverage these, leadership teams brainstormed ways to address specific problems in their units using those levers. Each group left the day with a prototype aimed at addressing a sexual harassment-related problem, and practice doing climate-oriented thinking that they could apply to future challenges. The training was meant to transform leaders' understanding of the problem and, more importantly, their willingness and ability to actively address it. The post-session evaluation indicated success in achieving these goals. Participants reported more perceived agency in their ability to take action on sexual harassment at both the unit and university level. Additionally, they left with concrete plans, including ways to better educate their units (e.g., developing scalable online learning modules) and communicate expectations around sexual harassment (e.g., develop a clear in-unit process for communicating concerns) (Heaton at al., 2020).

## Reflection 2: Anticipate and leverage participant differences

As educational developers know, learners come from diverse backgrounds and have different experiences. There is no one-size-fits-all learning experience. Critically engaging those differences, though, is distinct from acknowledging that everyone is different. Instead, it means attending to how power operates and choosing equitable practices that ensure all participants can learn (Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, 2021). This principle was a foundation of our training as we worked to introduce complexity around the topic and validate differences across individuals' experiences with sexual harassment.

We purposefully centered the voices of people who have been historically marginalized in higher education and at disproportionate risk for experiencing sexual harassment. This choice unsettled an understanding of sexual harassment as a problem that mainly white women experience—an understanding that prioritizes the comfort of people who hold majoritized identities. Our applied theatre case studies became a powerful tool to broaden a view of how sexual harassment intersects with other social problems like racism, heterosexism, and rankism. For example, two characters in the case studies were Lauren, a young queer staff member at U-M who encountered heterosexist, fatphobic gender harassment from a professor in her department; and Raziyah, a Muslim faculty member who experienced an array of sexist, xenophobic, racist behaviors that negatively affected her experience and ability to do her job. We showed those stories not to shock nor to reify the horrors that disproportionately affect marginalized individuals. We did this, rather, to ensure that people holding identities typically in the majority in U.S. higher education contexts saw how harassment can *compound* for other individuals who have multiple marginalities without asking or implying that an individual present in the training make personal disclosures themselves (Johnson et al., 2018). That act could also prove validating for individuals whose experiences have been sidelined in higher education and open a different conversation with colleagues that may not have been possible without the theatrical case studies. Following the session, attendees more strongly agreed that some groups of people are more likely to be sexually harassed than others. They also demonstrated clearer understanding of actions they could take to address sexual harassment and reported feeling more empowered to act, implying that they were better aware of how sexual harassment presents (Bean et al., 2021; Heaton 2020; Heaton et al., 2020).

We also engaged difference by activating the fact that the people in the room held a wide variety of experiences related to sexual harassment. Early in the session, we verbalized that there were, based on broadly generalizable statistics, participants present who had been sexually harassed; who had supported people who had been harassed; who had witnessed the sexual harassment of others without supporting them; and who had sexually harassed others, whether they were aware of it at the time or not (not mutually exclusive categories of people). That naming validated the reality often hidden in educational training: Academic units are entrenched in the systemic dysfunction that exists elsewhere in society. By making this a central premise, we did not ask leaders to “be on the lookout” for sexual harassment but habituated them from the start to think of themselves as people who had experience with sexual harassment, who could draw on those different experiences to build on new possibilities for the future. We hoped that acknowledging and leveraging leaders’ differences in the training primed them to take better care of their community members and themselves, especially those who are disproportionately harmed.

## Reflection 3: Model community interactions that participants should strive for in their communities

All educational development training can benefit from explicit attention to modeling prosocial behaviors, but this was especially important to our audience. Academic leaders are, by virtue of their roles, highly visible models for community behavior. Our leadership training intentionally modeled prosocial ways of behaving so leaders could use that example when returning to and setting expectations for their own units.

Throughout *CCR2SH*, participants practiced acknowledging differences and making space for each other in the conversations. We provided guidelines for participant engagement that accounted for common challenges, including 1) an invitation to self-care with campus-specific resources (which prioritized the well-being of people who have experienced or are experiencing sexual harassment); and 2) a call to recognize a wide range of expertise and experience without assuming what those experiences have been. That approach expanded into the prompts that we offered for viewing the different theatrical scenarios. We gave participants a moment to process their thoughts, but they were never directly asked to share their own experiences with their fellow audience members. The conversations focused, rather, on describing the dynamics of the scenes themselves or the organizational climates witnessed. That way, individuals could protect themselves and each other while entering into difficult conversations. The final brainstorming portion of the day contained even more specific engagement guidelines. Participants had detailed instructions regarding how to do each step of the prototyping process—including cleaning up afterward—all meant to disrupt inequitable patterns of participation and de-hierarchize group behaviors (Liedtka, 2018). We explicitly named these tactics as justification for the practice in the moment and models they could use in the future.

## Reflection 4: Frame assessment as reflection for designers and participants

For the assessment, we wanted to provide both an opportunity to receive program feedback and a space where participants could reflect on what they had learned. The assessment was framed to be as much a part of the learning process as the workshop activities were—an orientation useful for all educational development offerings.

The assessment focused on six areas: perceptions of the effectiveness of the workshop, confidence in specific abilities, participant definitions of sexual harassment, factual knowledge about sexual harassment, ways participants might put what they learned into practice, and workshop logistics. These sections allowed for participants to concretize key points and reflect on what they would do with what they learned in the future. A pre-session questionnaire set a baseline for attendees’ knowledge and confidence in their abilities. These questions were designed from the learning objectives set for the session and emphasized key points workshop designers wanted attendees to take away. The post-session questionnaire re-asked those questions alongside ones that encouraged further reflection. This allowed us to gauge the success of the workshop based on its goals/objectives as well as to see exactly what attendees were taking away from the session in terms of knowledge and future planning. By asking participants how they would implement what they learned, we could also see if there was future programming we might want to consider in support of these plans. Participants, in turn, had the opportunity to reflect on the material and solidify their learning.

This strategy was not without its challenges. A key challenge was assuring participants of anonymity. Because sexual harassment is a difficult topic to engage with, there were concerns that having participants give any type of identifier that would allow us to match pre- and post-session responses would deter participants from responding. One solution is to include a set of questions whose responses can be combined to create a unique nonsense identifier (e.g., what are the first two letters of your last high school, what are the last two numbers of your phone number). In addition, due to the breadth of areas to investigate, the questionnaires were on the longer side. We trimmed as much as possible while still gathering necessary data, but we relied more heavily on explaining the benefits the questionnaire would have as a reflective learning tool for participants.

Overall, this assessment strategy provided insight into what participants were learning while also giving participants an opportunity to concretize their takeaways from the workshop. By using the program assessment to reinforce session material and give attendees a place to summarize their experience, that assessment served as a cap to the overall experience of the day's session and increased the likelihood that attendees would take what they learned back to their unit contexts.

## Conclusion

The reflections above not only place a focus on academic leaders as a key population for creating climates that resist sexual harassment, but also demonstrate educational considerations that might help leaders enact that responsibility. We have found these reflections valuable as we have continued to do work on sexual harassment and organizational climate in hybrid and online settings. As modalities continue to shift our workflow across institutions, we hope these reflections offer clarity and guidance for educational developers working to create more equitable higher education spaces across many different role positions and social-problems-related content.

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