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# Radical Community-Based Learning: Tapping into Students' Sense of Justice

Vincent Russell and Spoma Jovanovic

Community-based learning (CBL), a staple on college campuses today, has demonstrated impressive results in teaching students how to blend academic instruction and civic engagement, yet falls short in fully preparing students for a future where protest and social change actions are required to uphold democracy. We urge that instruction shift to what we call radical CBL that connects students directly to grassroots and community organizers who lead efforts to change the political, social and economic deficits embedded in our locales. Radical CBL illuminates how hierarchy, patriarchy, and domination operate in hegemonic forms that are initially invisible to many students in order to equip them to take action to address those systems of oppression. Radical CBL is built upon the pillars of activism, politics, and answerability to tap into students' desire to engage in meaningful work to advance social justice.

**Keywords:** *Radical community-based learning, activism, politics, answerability, social justice*

# Aprendizaje Radical Basado en la Comunidad: Aprovechar el Sentido de la Justicia de los Estudiantes

Vincent Russell y Spoma Jovanovic

El aprendizaje basado en la comunidad (CBL, por sus siglas en inglés), elemento recurrente en los campus universitarios de hoy en día, ha demostrado alcanzar impresionantes resultados a la hora de enseñar a los estudiantes cómo combinar la instrucción académica y el compromiso cívico. Pero se queda corto a la hora de preparar a los estudiantes para un futuro en el que las acciones de protesta y cambio social sean necesarias para mantener la democracia. Instamos a que la enseñanza se oriente hacia lo que denominamos CBL radical, que conecta directamente a los estudiantes con los organizadores de base y comunitarios que lideran los esfuerzos por cambiar los déficits políticos, sociales y económicos arraigados en nuestras localidades. El CBL radical ayuda a los estudiantes a entender que la jerarquía, el patriarcado y la dominación operan en formas hegemónicas, inicialmente invisibles para muchos de ellos, y de esa manera, los equipa para que puedan hacer frente a esos sistemas de opresión. El CBL Radical se basa en los pilares del activismo, la política y la responsabilidad aprovechando el interés de los estudiantes en participar en un trabajo significativo que promueva la justicia social.

**Palabras clave:** *Aprendizaje radical basado en la comunidad, activismo, política, responsabilidad, justicia social*

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Community-engaged pedagogy, involving research and teaching, historically has sought to correct the imbalance and fragmentation of social life where financial and corporate interests now penetrate every aspect of the human experience, and to instead amplify the core values of collaboration, transparency, equality, and freedom. To do so, community-engaged pedagogy develops the capacities of students to build and participate in what Benjamin Barber (1984) calls a strong democracy, emphasizing participation, creativity, virtuous action, and community-building. In 2020, youth-led rebellions against racial capitalism in public squares all over the world alerted many educators that the time for revolutionary change is upon us, and of the vital role that postsecondary institutions can play in preparing students for civic life.

Community-based learning (CBL) has been the prime means to provide students with education and experiences that prepares them for thoughtful engagement in life, work, and citizenship during and after college. Here, we ask: have institutions of higher education offered enough in their partnerships with homeless shelters, low-income elementary schools, trash clean-ups, and food collection to confront the injustices at the root of many, lingering inequities that leave so many people behind in the trajectory of so-called progress? Is CBL delivering fully on the promise postsecondary institutions offer to prepare students for the future?

We fear not. Thus, we posit the need for radical CBL, inspired by those already recognizing the need to shift our instructional practices and foci to connect students more directly to the people who are organizing in communities around the world to address the issues, problems, and hopes embedded in locales. Those activists and organizers in the community do not see elected leaders and stale political systems able to respond to the need for change.

Our argument and suggested pedagogical interventions are informed by our combined histories of teaching students to engage in critical social issues in CBL courses, with the research presented herein having been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Radical CBL draws from, combines, and extends the tenets of philosophical inquiry, critical pedagogy and activism into experiences that put the interests of the community first. More specifically, it demonstrates that following the lead of historically marginalized members of communities in their struggles for justice provides the most promising hope for positive social change. Mahatma Gandhi, Fannie Lou Hamer, and more recently, Alicia Garza are compelling examples of people determined to lead collective efforts for social change. They demonstrate how courage, commitment, and communicative competencies can be learned, practiced, and put into action through radical CBL (Jovanovic, 2019).

When we teach students that the interests of those who have been targeted with discrimination—and, at worst, physical violence—are the ones who are best able to lead us toward social change, we teach students that people in our midst provide essential resources and experiences to address the root causes of global injustices. In radical CBL, learning leans toward illuminating how hierarchy, patriarchy, and domination operate in hegemonic forms that are initially invisible to many students and equips them to take action to address those systems of oppression. A social justice sensibility, in the ways Frey et al. (1996) called for, means working with grassroots groups and lifting up their stories to influence political processes that advance justice, not profit. It requires, as well, bringing students into the fold of community action by introducing them to the political skills, ethical considerations, and various pathways to intervene where injustices persist.

Radical CBL offers a platform for students to recognize that their roles in community and global concerns are better served when coordinated with the justice-based work of others. Teaching and learning this way mean that educators cannot skirt the responsibility to teach students the history, knowledge, and skills required to engage in contemporary political discussions, partner with community change agents, learn the history of how institutions and practices have given rise to persistent inequities, and support students' capacities for creativity that are necessary to organize with others. Teaching foundational community organizing principles, a centerpiece of radical CBL, ensures that students will leave college with greater confidence and direct experiences upon which to draw to initiate critical changes in their lives, at work, and throughout the communities of which they are a part (Sanford, 2020; DelGandio, 2008). This project, as we see it, requires courage by faculty to venture into new territory pedagogically and politically. It requires students to take seriously the relevance of their studies to improve the world. It requires, as well,

that faculty align with grassroots organizations that have the will and the capacity to both ignite protest when necessary and to sustain long-term organizing efforts that target justice as the goal.

This article begins with a discussion of why CBL needs to be more radical, in response to all that threatens democratic well-being, before turning to a review of the scholarly literature related to CBL and differing approaches to this form of instruction as a method to bolster democratic skills and engagement. Then, we define and detail the distinctive features of radical CBL, drawing on the work of philosophers and critical scholars. Throughout, we offer examples of courses and projects to illustrate the power of radical CBL. We conclude with recommendations for ways faculty can foster partnerships that support activism for social justice.

## Teaching and Learning as Radical Responses to Unrequited Justice

Society has changed drastically since the COVID-19 pandemic and high-profile instances of racial injustices flared in 2020. Protests and community organizing became ordinary affairs for many U.S. Americans, including college students who marched in the streets and joined online forums to express outrage. Around the world, calls of "Black Lives Matter" rose to new heights in the wake of filmed police killings of Black people and in recognition of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people of color. At the beginning of these crises, world leaders provided little information about how our future would unfold; instead, revolution was in the air both from the left and the right of the political spectrum, as people were determined to advance their ideals of how society should be organized.

As threats increase around the globe that require more immediate action to avert, for instance, humanitarian crises, nuclear (and traditional) warfare, and climate catastrophes, other dangers to democracy in the United States. are on the rise with calls for voter restrictions, homophobic and transphobic legislation, book bans, and other instructional censorship particularly around matters of race and gender identity. In such a climate, how can educators best respond, and how can they carry out their responsibilities to educate students to be active, engaged members of society?

Although embattled and imperfect, the university is a bastion of hope, where educating people to study the world, investigate its history, and consider its future is designed to inspire actions that can literally change the world. University educators often educate to help each new generation of minds solve the problems that plague communities—poverty; global warming; racial disparities; police accountability; affordable housing; insufficient access to clean water, food, and other basic needs; gender inequities, including oppressive conditions for people who are transgender, non-binary, and/or queer; inadequate educational resources; and rising wealth gaps. These challenges are often caused and exacerbated by the impacts of hyper-capitalism or neoliberalism, ideologies that prioritize the needs of business over the needs of people, and that place emphasis on private property and market competition over the role of government to secure the public good (Giroux, 2021). For these many reasons, radical CBL is needed as an antidote to the helplessness that can result from the absence of relevant education and action. Based on our experiences, the authors believe that radical CBL inspires life-long learning and commitments to the pursuit of justice, no matter where students start their civic journey while in college or continue afterwards.

The discovery through radical CBL is that to live in a free and just world requires more than simply saying it already exists or that we have it in America; it requires that educators position our institutions, faculty, and students to advance social goods that will positively impact the many, not just an elite few in our country and around the world. This was made profoundly clear on a scale that current generations have not known in attempts to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its variants, respond to economic crises, confront the call for police accountability, and take action to mitigate humanitarian and refugee disasters.

So, we ask, in what ways can educators teach students to be radicals of love, ethics, and care, as Paulo Friere (1970) so eloquently suggested, to create a more just world? Whereas, teaching students about civic engagement once was a reasonable starting point to inspire future political action, today, students are rightly skeptical of our traditional political systems and more readily and quickly immersing themselves in social

justice-based solidarity actions to effect change (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2018).

Students' passions offer tremendous momentum for advancing important community-based learning in the academy. And, even for students not yet focused on justice in community needs, students can deepen their commitment to larger societal concerns that manifest all around us when instructional design is attentive to the ethical questions and responsibilities that ground social change initiatives. For many faculty, offering community-based learning blends academic instruction with community engagement. This pedagogical approach, of applying disciplinary knowledge to address community problems, has the potential to be greater than a service-based experience when it is reframed according to a theoretical framework for radical CBL that is dependent upon answerability (Bakhtin, 1986), politics (Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010), and activism (Frey & Blinne, 2017) to advance radical love (Friere, 1970).

## Community-Based Learning

The terms community-based learning and service-learning are often used interchangeably in the literature and in practice. We use community-based learning in this article because of its emphasis on community instead of service. However, we use service-learning when quoting from other sources or discussing specific approaches that use that term (e.g., critical service-learning). CBL is a form of experiential education through which students apply and enhance their theoretical knowledge through experiences with community partners and reflect on those experiences (Ferrari & Chapman, 2013; Salam et al., 2019). Similarly, Goering (2017) defined CBL as "students and professors collaborating with community partners to strengthen communities through the application of disciplinary and class-related knowledge and skills" (p. 1594). Distilled to its essence, CBL is "learning by doing for others" (Dubinsky, 2002, p. 64).

The Carnegie Foundation defines community engagement as the collaboration between colleges and universities and their larger communities "for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Public Purpose Institute, n.d., para. 16). Thus, CBL courses commonly pair students with governmental, nonprofit, or other community organizations. Students learn how current issues require not just expert involvement, but also citizen action.

CBL aims to develop what Bellah et al. (2007) described as foundational competencies for democracy. Those include understanding our common fate, appreciating otherness and difference, holding in tension our contradictory impulses and actions, cultivating a personal voice and sense of agency, and putting into practice skills that contribute to community building.

Dewey's (1938) experiential learning theory provides the foundation for CBL. According to Dewey, learning is best accomplished when students identify problems, try to solve them in real life, and construct meaning through the interaction of knowledge and experience. Building on these ideas, Kolb (1984) developed a learning cycle often cited in CBL scholarship: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. CBL can occur through courses taken for credit, extracurricular activities, and/or research projects, among other possibilities.

CBL has a record of positive outcomes for students, universities, and community partners, contributing to its identification as a high-impact teaching practice (Kuh, 2008). CBL's effects on students have been substantially documented (Goering, 2017; Hatcher et al., 2019). A meta-analysis of 62 studies involving 11,837 students found that, compared to control groups, students participating in CBL had significant gains in attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic performance (Celio et al., 2011). A more recent meta-analysis of CBL research found numerous benefits for students: an enhanced sense of civic engagement, development of civic responsibility, increased social work in the community, personal growth and cognitive development, increased social and interpersonal skills, improved communication and cultural competence, social capital development, enhanced moral reasoning, awareness regarding social justice, and burgeoning leadership and mentoring skills (Salam et al., 2019). With regard to civic engagement, specifically, research has shown that CBL can increase students' awareness of structural factors related to inequality, their motivation to work toward social justice,

their sense of responsibility for others, and their civic involvement (Barth et al., 2014; Bowie & Cassim, 2016; Eder, 2013; Fullerton et al., 2015).

CBL also can benefit faculty and university administrators. For faculty, CBL provides opportunities for action research—such as community-based research, participatory action research, or youth participatory action research—to test and refine theories in real-world scenarios (Darby & Newman, 2014; Frey & Palmer, 2014; Stoecker, 2016). Regarding university administrators, CBL has been shown to improve retention, and academic success among college students, particularly those from historically underserved backgrounds (Celio et al., 2011).

Finally, and most importantly, CBL can provide myriad benefits for community partners (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007). The specifics depend on the project(s) implemented, but community partners' efforts are bolstered with students' hours of work in canvassing and outreach efforts; the applied aspects of research projects, such as documenting the reach and impact of organizing efforts; and other university resources, such as funding opportunities, meeting spaces, professional networking, and graphic design and printing services (Stoecker, 2016). CBL courses we have taught have seen students develop infographics and other visual presentations that community partners then use in propagating their mission. Students have put into use their learning on storytelling to collect narratives of resistance that contribute to larger public narratives designed to mobilize others in struggles for social change (Bell, 2019; Ganz, 2011). Students and faculty also have written grant proposals for community partners, drafted white papers, and organized youth at their universities to attend candlelight vigils, press conferences, and protest rallies hosted by the community partner.

Many universities and colleges recognize the utility of CBL to improve student learning and help transform communities, often with help from a university center for service-learning, leadership, and/or civic engagement (Hallaq & Mwangi, 2020; Holland et al., 2019). CBL has been implemented in a range of disciplines, including health sciences and nursing, business and economics, computer and information sciences, sociology and criminal justice, teacher education, geography and environmental studies, linguistics and communication, and fine arts (Salam et al., 2019).

CBL is not devoid of its critics, however. CBL can unintentionally reinforce power inequalities among students, between universities and communities, and between students and community partners (Lewis, 2004; Steiner et al., 2011). For instance, when privileged students provide services to people from oppressed communities, beliefs in the superiority of the students' own groups can be reinforced (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Camacho, 2004; Mitchell, 2008). CBL is open to critique as well for trying to do too much and in doing so, accomplishing too little. In addition to focusing on the application of disciplinary content in community-based interventions, CBL courses also prepare students for lives of active political engagement, encourage students to reflect on their social identities as related to work in the community, and help ameliorate social injustices through their service (Mitchell & Chavous, 2021). To imagine individual and collective transformation could happen in one term, based on the experience in one course, subjects faculty's best intentions to critique when efforts fall short of that goal. In the next section, we define and detail how radical CBL, though not a panacea, can better prepare students for the complexities of social change actions at the same time it provides focused skill development in community organizing and activism.

## Radical CBL

Having reviewed scholarship that has informed the growth of CBL within higher education, here we offer an explanation of radical CBL, including what it requires, its distinction from other critical CBL approaches, the relationship between the local and the global to radical CBL, and principles and values that inform the approach. As we explain below, radical CBL is risky and requires answerability among and between students, faculty, and community partners, but those risks are necessary if universities are to address the various ills facing twenty-first century democracies.

## Radical CBL Defined

Radical CBL involves faculty and students partnering with grassroots social movements, groups, and/or organizations to engage in political activism for social justice. Activism involves "engaging in direct, vigorous action to support or oppose one side of a controversial issue" (Frey & Blinne, 2017, p. 12), and, in the case of radical CBL, is directed toward social justice, in which "people have their human rights and freedoms respected, receive equitable treatment with regard to opportunities and resources, and are not discriminated against because of their class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and similar identity markers" (Frey & Blinne, 2017, p. 12). The activism that occurs through radical CBL is also political, meaning that it addresses power inequalities (e.g., between people from oppressed populations and social elites) through collective action to promote cultural, social, and policy change (Kendi, 2019; Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010). Lastly, radical CBL is relational (and therefore answerable, which we explain below), meaning that learning through radical CBL "is about constant coordination of self with [Other], self within self, and it is in constant motion" (Patel, 2016, p. 77). Such learning is transformational, which involves "coming into being and constantly altering that being; it is a subjective and . . . messy act. . .. Coming into being is in essence about being-in-relation" (Patel, 2016, p. 76). Implementing radical CBL is not easy, but it is rooted in radical love (Freire, 1970)—love of self, love of the Other, and love of community—and it is radical love that motivates this approach to CBL, for there can be no justice without love (hooks, 1994).

Radical CBL can be classified under Morton's (1995) social change paradigm of service-learning because the social system (instead of individual students) is the target of change, with the people affected by the issue involved in making the change. People who are systematically marginalized exercise their power, and CBL fosters an educational cycle that promotes ongoing engagement with and efforts to address the root causes of problems. Radical CBL also aligns with what Stoecker (2016) calls liberating service-learning that inverts typical instructional practices from a student-centered approach to a social change-based effort. What follows is that students learn to be in service to their communities rather than learning from the service, a shift that orients students toward contributing to efforts for real change that communities want and need. Finally, the nature of learning in radical CBL is similar to critical service-learning (e.g., Butin, 2015; Mitchell, 2008, 2014, 2015) and social justice activism service-learning (Britt, 2012, 2014) that seek to develop among students a critical consciousness—or what Paulo Friere (1970) called *conscientization*—that in turn leads to opportunities for students to develop skills necessary for activism. Radical CBL builds upon critical service-learning where "students . . . see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51). The learning that happens in radical CBL can be described as a blend of justice-oriented and participatory education for citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), wherein students learn to think critically to identify the root causes of social issues and then work toward new solutions and social change, often practicing skills such as protesting, canvassing, organizing community meetings, hosting teach-ins, speaking at city council meetings, and collecting signatures on petitions.

The most significant aspect of radical CBL that distinguishes it from other approaches is its emphasis on answerability. This concept of answerability has become well-developed by decolonial scholars of community-based research (e.g., McKenzie & Tuck, 2016; Patel, 2016; Tuck & Guishard, 2013). Radical CBL's contribution to service-learning scholarship is to fold those ideas into community-based *learning* (not just research). Answerability includes aspects of being responsible, accountable, and part of an exchange, and it can aid educators in articulating how their work speaks to, with, and against other entities (Patel, 2016).

Inspired by the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), answerability means not only being answerable to or responsible for the utterance that just occurred in the relationship but also to the long history of discourses that give rise to what is possible in the current moment. The utterance chain connects educators today to legacies of injustice, as well as ongoing policies and practices that dehumanize and oppress living beings. For instance, students are not only answerable to their immediate community partner (and vice versa) but also are answerable to the histories and persistence of racist capitalism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and other oppressive ideologies. At the same time, educators, students, and community partners can learn from

important historical figures who led the way for social change that gave rise, for instance, to fair labor practices, legislation, and civil rights protections. Thus, in radical CBL, students, faculty, and community partners are answerable to each other in their immediate relationships, and they are answerable to historic discourses that continue to influence those relationships today. Lastly, it is through relational answerability that encounters with the other foster creative ruptures of possibility; in other words, answerability rejects the inevitability of oppression by fostering learning as an act of futurity (Patel, 2016).

Answerability is central to dialogic ethics to emphasize the relationality between and among students, faculty, and community partners. Relationality suggests that CBL participants not just establish trust, but also be trust*worthy*, and that the focus of the public work "is not on people, not on their bodies, but on the relationships between bodies, ideas, and institutions" (Tuck & Guishard, 2013, p. 21). Relationality in radical CBL requires that students and faculty take time to understand the sociopolitical complexities of communities with which they work and respond on the communities' terms. Thus, radical CBL seeks to contribute to community partners in their desired currency of service (e.g., volunteers for phone banking, speakers at a city council meeting, or facilitators at community input sessions).

Answerability's requirement that learners and community partners establish trust and accountability with one another is necessary in radical CBL because the stakes are real, and it means treating seriously that responsibility to the community. Thus, in radical CBL, students' work with their communities is not simply a "learning opportunity," where if the students fall short or make a mistake, then the only consequence is a poor grade. In radical CBL, the quality of students' work matters beyond the grade, it results in consequences for the community partner, and the community at large (e.g., the success or failure of a campaign to raise the minimum wage). In this way, students and faculty are answerable to community partners to ensure that the students' public work is meaningful and impactful for the community; similarly, students and faculty hold community partners responsible to provide meaningful opportunities for political activism.

## The Local and the Global

We see radical CBL as being concerned, primarily, with local community concerns while recognizing those concerns may be connected to global issues (e.g., the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement; the climate justice movement; the peace movement; and others we have named elsewhere in this article) and intertwined with one another (Russell & Boromisza-Habashi, 2020). Often, an international focus is deemed more worldly and valuable in academic settings, yet we find the local focus to be vital for the project of democracy. It is locally that students can more readily rally support for an issue or cause, something many students saw during the pandemic when vaccines and tests were meted out in wildly different ways, depending on the community. Locally, students can see, feel, and witness how the quality of life changes when a city elects its first Black woman as mayor, or when a landfill in a low-income, minority residential area is stopped from reopening due to public outcry, and when the narrative surrounding a past tragedy is rewritten to account for the survivor's stories, as was the case during the first Truth and Reconciliation process in the United States (Jovanovic, 2012).

Students in one of our radical CBL courses worked with a local partner to resist the construction of a weapons factory owned by a U.S. military contractor in a nearby city. The students' work was rooted in and motivated by, primarily, local concerns: opposition to the extractive nature of the weapons industry, tax giveaways for a multinational corporation that would impoverish the city, the corrupt political influence of the weapons manufacturer on local politics, and the pollution created by the factory. After all, a central tenet of community organizing is to motivate supporters by addressing their immediate material needs (Alinsky, 1971; Minieri & Getsos, 2007).

Local residents and students also see their local fight connected to global issues of war and the military industrial complex, for the weapons made in that local factory will be used to bomb poor people on the other side of the world. The students and community partners understand their activism as occurring in solidarity with antiwar activists in Yemen, Somalia, Ukraine, and many other peoples around the globe victimized by the U.S. empire. Although experiences detailed here are focused on the United States because

that is where we work and live, radical CBL can be implemented in other countries. For instance, we are inspired by the work of Kennedy et al. (2020) working with Indigenous communities in Canada to decolonize service-learning, that could be characterized as radical CBL, as is other education already occurring around the world, especially in the Global South, which has a rich tradition of leveraging extra-educational sites for transformational learning and activism (e.g., Cooks, 2000; Fals-Borda, 1987; Freire, 1970; Harter et al., 2007; Wallerstein & Duran, 2008).

## Readings, Assignments, and Classroom Culture

Radical CBL also tends to incorporate specific classroom techniques related to readings, community engagement, and classroom discussion. For instance, instructors who adopt radical CBL may assign readings that foster a critical consciousness, including pieces that feature the voices of people of color, that reflect critical scholarship, that offer grassroots understanding of history (especially local history, whenever possible), and that provide narratives of participatory, deliberative democracy (e.g., case studies of social justice campaigns and theoretical and/or empirical scholarship about participatory democracy). In a radical CBL course called Reclaiming Democracy (a collaborative project of five colleges and universities and numerous community members), we have taught in Greensboro, North Carolina, we have had success using a book detailing the Civil Rights Movement in that city (Chafe, 1981). Greensboro was the birthplace of the sit-in movement in the United States and the site of numerous civil rights campaigns and issues, including the 1979 Greensboro Massacre and the first truth and reconciliation commission in the country created in response to the massacre (Jovanovic, 2012). Students comment on how vivid the connections are between historical events and present-day conditions. They draw from their own experiences, for instance, to discuss the continuing impacts of how segregated housing in the South emerged in part from bank practices of redlining that has left lower socioeconomic neighborhoods today with less city support for economic development and fewer property tax dollars to fund schools.

We have offered throughout this essay numerous examples of the kinds of community engagement students perform through radical CBL. It is worth reiterating that such engagement should be with and for community partners, placing their needs first and finding ways for students to support their campaigns for justice. Students may participate in canvassing, speaking at public fora (e.g., city council meetings), phone banking, research, or organizing and attending protests/marches. The point is that "service" through Radical CBL should be responsive to community partners by addressing their direct needs, which in addition to engaging in activism may also include offering tutoring, advocacy, childcare, translation, or maybe even helping them with laundry, with meaningful interactions building over time as students and partners become mutually implicated in each others' lives (Tuck & Guishard, 2013).

A final component of radical CBL classrooms is an emphasis on dialogue and discussion. Radical CBL typically fosters a classroom environment steeped in critical pedagogy. In our classes, students, at times, speak and listen to understand one another, while at other times, they challenge each other's ideas. The instructor pushes students to think deeply about the role of oppressive systems in their lives, their relations to those systems, and reflections through the readings, assignments, and public work. Students are encouraged to challenge the instructor, too, seeing all in the classroom as teacher-learners who are answerable to one another. Such deep engagement with the other is inspired by radical love and responsibility to each other (Freire, 1970; Levinas, 1969/1961). These conversations can be messy and time-intensive, reflecting, at varying times, a rowdy democracy (Ivie, 2002) or a slow democracy (Clark & Teachout, 2012), where arguments are made and considered and where clear answers (e.g., right and wrong) are not always found.

## Principles and Values of Radical CBL

In sum, radical CBL is rooted in principles of love and answerability (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Patel, 2016). This approach—and the public work it entails—is risky, just as any form of activism requires varying levels of risk (e.g., signing a petition is less risky than engaging in civil disobedience). Yet, if we are to create a better world, if we are to avert the civilization-ending threats of climate catastrophe and nuclear

war, or the democracy-ending threats of voter suppression, authoritarianism, and racist capitalism, then such risks are necessary. In radical CBL, the stakes are real, and the communities in which we work depend on us.

Of course, community partners and students take on the most risk through this approach to learning because they are the ones engaging in direct activism, but faculty must also accept risk. In the classroom, they must be vulnerable, open to critique from students and community partners. Outside the classroom, they may face pressure and criticism from administrators and reactionary activists for facilitating learning that promotes collective freedom. It is not surprising that faculty from marginalized populations may fear retaliation from administrators who shy away from activism and find themselves in a higher educational system that increasingly operates similar to a business, beholden to monied benefactors. For instance, the possibility for contingent faculty colleagues not having their contracts renewed is ever-present, with radical CBL being one reason some worry they could lose favor among those determining their employment fate. Despite such risks, many non-tenured faculty, contingent faculty, graduate student instructors, and other faculty from marginalized populations have implemented and continue to practice radical CBL (e.g., McConnell, 2017; Murray & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2014). Given these risks, though, faculty may need to be strategic in selecting community partners and social justice issues; they may need to "think like an organizer," in terms of what projects and processes are winnable, or what limited actions they can take now that will help them build power with students and community partners to engage in more consequential action in the future (Minieri & Getsos, 2007).

Just as faculty may have to think like organizers in radical CBL, students, too, learn how to think like organizers because, through radical CBL, they learn skills for activism. Some of these lessons include cultivating democratic attitudes that are necessary for working in intercultural alliances and challenging the status quo, such as empathy, patience, attachment, responsibility, trust, and respect (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Other skills might include public speaking, facilitation skills, organizing and leading meetings, interviewing, survey development and administration, media production (e.g., social media, infographics, press releases, videos, and so forth), and many more (for reviews of student and community benefits, see Hatcher et al., 2019; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007). In radical CBL, as students learn to think like organizers, they develop critical thinking skills by identifying power dynamics, as well as analytical and emotional thinking when they strategize, identify targets, and develop political alliances to leverage collective power that promotes social justice.

In other words, for radical CBL to take root, the classroom and community learning require a shift to learning how to effectively engage with contentious, political matters. We thus detail next how students benefit from this engaged, justice-oriented learning, and how faculty may need to change in order to accommodate the demands and rewards of radical CBL

## Student Perspectives: Politics Reimagined for Civic Learning

Students are eager to learn about political and civic issues, though their knowledge is sometimes limited prior to entering college. For 20 years, one of us has had an assignment that includes attending a local city council meeting. Of the more than 500 students in that course through the years, only a handful had previously attended such a meeting. Others expressed surprise that they would even be allowed in a public meeting. Almost universally, the experience of being in city council chambers illuminates for the students that government operations, elected leaders, and city staff members are more accessible than they previously thought. Students also recognize that many, if not most government officials, bend to the will of campaign donors and wealthy economic interests in the community, while minimizing the interests and advocacy of grassroots groups and ordinary citizens. Ultimately, six insights from undergraduates are critical for faculty to understand.

First, students crave the opportunity to be involved in civic matters that have important, creative outcomes, and if they have that, it is most often in (some) CBL courses. In our courses, students have partnered with community organizers in a city-wide effort to promote participatory budgeting—"a form of participatory democracy in which citizens and civil society organizations have the right to participate

directly in determining fiscal policy" (Marquetti et al., 2012, p. 63)—and they have collected views of people experiencing homelessness to share with elected leaders and working groups as they, in turn, consider how to structure interventions and support programming for the homeless. Later, the students reflected on those experiences as they neared graduation, reporting that immersion in the community in those ways exposed issues and problems the students had not previously known, which then influenced their thinking and actions as they considered post-graduation plans.

With participatory budgeting, students learned that advocating for real change in their communities is hard, takes time, but is possible when people work together. Some students discovered that residents living in a part of the city marked by poverty wanted more street lighting as a way to increase public safety. The students' eyes were opened to how racial disparities surface in many ways rarely illuminated in newspaper reports or city council meetings. One student said of the experience, "Community work is now a priority." Another reported that the work with participatory budgeting led her to pursue a career as an advocate.

In another course, students spent evenings in the city's shelter for homeless adults. They established relationships over meals and games before querying shelter guests for a research project about their views on city needs and priorities. Beyond sharing the research results with elected officials and a county task force to end homelessness, the students were touched by the experiences of those who said they could not find affordable housing and admitted to needing help with job training. The students learned, too, that the homeless people believed the city would benefit from having more bus shelters and greater services for those experiencing mental disabilities and substance abuse. Giving voice to those needs, and adding to what other community members have advocated for, led to the desired changes. As a direct result of the experience, one student entered a year-long post-graduation service program in New York, another accepted a teaching position in an impoverished area in South America, and another pursued nonprofit management work instead of a marketing career she had planned.

Second, students want to learn more about social, political, and economic issues that they hear about in the news. However, absent classroom instruction about that and direct engagement that allows students to see, feel, and understand community needs, students say complex public issues are akin to a distant foreign language. Thus, instruction needs to be paired with critical civic activity surrounding controversial issues to expose students to compelling public matters that come alive through stories, a reckoning with history, and coordinated community organizing efforts. These instructional opportunities inside and outside the classroom put students in proximity with people who are suffering from and fighting against injustices. Those contacts help students develop empathy where once confusion reigned in their hearts and minds. Additionally, students get mentored by faculty and community members in how to collaborate for the purposes of changing structures and policies.

Third, students view civic activity as favorable when it features cooperation and work for the welfare of others, in specific ways. Graduating seniors, reflecting on their undergraduate experiences, and who were collaborators with community activists, said they learned how to be flexible and adapt to changing situations, something increasingly missing in instruction that relies on standardized testing and the syllabus as a contract never to be modified. Students who partnered with grassroots organizers said they learned from stories about both past failed and successful attempts for change that drove home the point that working together in collective action offers the best hope for desired outcomes, but in no way guarantees them. The students spoke of how, in the process, they became better listeners, better collaborators, better critical thinkers, and better leaders. They cited the value of working with diverse, multigenerational coalitions and being exposed to the greater context in which current, local actions reside, as key conditions for seeing moves toward, if not achievement of, transformational changes.

Fourth, students, who are highly skeptical of politics, yearn for an introduction to the political processes that have been largely missing from previous civic instruction at school and even at home. We have seen the benefits of broadening instruction to fully embrace activism and organizing, and social media/technology use in democracy today. Understandably, in the polarized political climate in which we live, a 2018 survey of 130 undergraduate students at a minority-serving, high research university in the U.S. South revealed that nearly all the students regarded politics with deep skepticism (Jovanovic et al., 2021). One student summed up how she and her peers viewed politics by saying, "It's dirty—politicians don't

work with the interests of the people in mind." Faculty need to provide instruction about the role of politics as a defining feature of democracy that consists of the processes by which we make decisions collectively (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). That political processes are everywhere (not simply at the ballot box) is worth reminding students to allow them to understand politics as worthy of their attention. It is important as well to distinguish politics as a governance process from grandstanding politicians who seek publicity with increasingly outrageous claims, as we saw in the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson (Farias, 2022).

Fifth, to help students become active civic agents, it is necessary to introduce them to historical and current discussions of the impact of inequality and oppression. The links, for instance, between the lengthy process by which women advanced suffrage to eventually gain the right to vote more than 100 years ago is directly applicable to discussions and actions of how women are organizing in the 21st century to confront sexual harassment, gender pay inequality, parental rights, and child welfare. Thus, when students work, for instance, with local chapters of the League of Women Voters, NAACP, or Rock the Vote, their understanding of the historical context provides them with confidence and knowledge to have critical discussions in local, deep canvassing efforts.

The power of radical CBL was conveyed by a student who attended her first protest march in 2021 as an ally to those who had faced unfair police harassment. She wrote:

> It struck me, there is something beautifully vulnerable to display your beliefs in public. Leaning into that feeling, I also stood taller, more erect than usual. I was with a group of people who deeply felt the same. . . . Police departments are dehumanizing and killing people of color, with their weapon of choice being hate.

The experience prompted the student to do more. She joined others in weekly protests in front of City Hall. Though one of only a few younger people there initially, she invited other students she knew to join her, and soon thereafter, the youth presence at the protests swelled in numbers. As she reflected on her involvement, she noted that the story of addressing injustices is one steeped in history and one that continues, with her as a small part of that in her community.

At its best, community engagement is introduced to students not as a one-time activity for a course, but as an important responsibility of citizenship that extends throughout a student's college experience and beyond. Providing multiple and varied opportunities for students to deepen their involvement, year after year, builds a critical path to sustained engagement at a time when it is sorely needed.

## Faculty Emboldening Students' Desire for Justice

Our experiences leading radical CBL programs also offer insight about two things faculty can do to better structure their courses/programs to contribute to local community-based social justice campaigns. First, faculty can deepen their own learning about community histories by reading about their city's past, inviting guest speakers who have been long-time activists to class, and showcasing documentaries of local struggles, often available in their university libraries. Second, faculty can boost their credibility in the community and model effective organizing practices by joining with community organizers who have years of on-the-ground experience in advocating for greater resources or lobbying for municipal changes (Cloud, 2020). In other words, we advocate that faculty members become active citizens themselves, first. The more time faculty personally invest in community action, the greater will be the opportunities to tap into long-term partnerships with activist groups and to develop multi-year projects that demonstrate the process by which social change occurs.

To teach radical CBL, faculty members need to understand themselves and students as active members of, not passive observers of, the local community. The oft-repeated distinction between the university and the community is a false dichotomy. Conceptualizing the university as detached from the community only serves to obscure oppressive systems on and off campus (McCann, 2020). Furthermore, it is worth noting that students and faculty members may come from the same underserved communities in which radical CBL seeks to intervene.

In learning the history and stories of the neighborhoods, people, and communities that comprise discursive sites of engagement, faculty are better prepared to acknowledge their role(s) in local struggles for justice, and collaboratively identify with community partners the potential spaces for intervention. When this happens, the doors swing wide open for other kinds of actions. Some of which we have been a part include: joint presentations with community members and scholars at other schools, in the community, and at academic and nonacademic convenings; faculty-drafted letters of support as signatories to amici briefs; involvement in U.S. Presidential White House task forces. These examples of collaboration provide faculty with rich resources upon which to draw and share with students, and often offer opportunities to involve interested students in important events alongside the faculty member.

Gaining historical knowledge can be broad and issue-focused (e.g., abortion rights, prison abolition, climate justice) or localized, by exposing the oppression and resistance as manifested in a specific locale. For us, the underground railroad's proximity to our institutions of learning reveals how slavery was abolished, yet servitude and discrimination persisted in other forms to this day. Similarly, climate issues impacting our region underscore how rural and poor communities nearby have shouldered the consequences that students in college may not have seen. As faculty educate themselves, they can, in turn, incorporate some of this contextual knowledge into the classroom.

In our experience, students are most responsive to local histories. When students read an historical account, they can make connections to present-day conditions. One student remarked that the readings and the grassroots organizers with whom he worked with the course Reclaiming Democracy "exposed me to so much history and interesting facts and also confirmed to me that social justice is important and relevant, and people out there are also fighting the good fight." In addition to readings, faculty can organize historical neighborhood tours, led by local activists and elders and visit local museums that tell stories of struggle and resistance. Faculty can organize public events in person or on Zoom to introduce everyday heroes to their students and the surrounding community. Finally, faculty can craft assignments and projects that place students in positions to collect untold stories or contribute to continuing efforts spearheaded by local activists.

Faculty ought to see themselves as members of the community in which they intervene, however they also must trust and honor the knowledge and experience of other residents, organizers, and activists. These individuals/groups typically are deeply in touch with the needs of their neighbors and the communities that they represent. It is not easy work, however, for faculty. Significantly, many social justice-oriented efforts lack formal 501(c)3 status and full-time staff, making it more challenging for faculty to establish relationships with them. There may be no office to contact, only a cell phone and email address that are sporadically checked. There may be no regularly scheduled meeting times. The legacy of universities exploiting marginalized communities also has resulted in justified skepticism among some residents about partnering with universities today. Nevertheless, faculty must be persistent in their presence and interest with these groups, for such efforts are essential for advancing participatory democracy, and the connections and opportunity for direct action in those efforts and movements tend to be greater. In contrast, established nonprofits—more often selected as CBL engagement partners—offer greater ease for planning but too often operate within the neoliberal paradigm where donors and money dictate the terms of action that may provide relief that recognizes the beneficence of wealthy contributors while not actively working to change systems or challenge the status quo.

When radical CBL projects are designed in collaboration with grassroots community partners, faculty need to remain flexible. Despite the well-organized campaigns of some activist groups, potentially transformative moments can and often do occur without much notice, as the nation saw with the 2020 protests in response to the brutal murder of George Floyd by police. Faculty who are prepared to respond to partners' calls when the need arises communicate respect that builds trust and increased opportunities for action in the future. The new direction may deviate from original plans, but the newer outcome may serve a greater purpose.

Finally, the faculty role in brokering relationships between students and the community is critical. Admittedly, some students may possess connections to local activist circles that can be cultivated for course activities. However, faculty often become the fulcrum around which these relationships pivot, in part

because of the strong institutional presence that a college or university provides. Faculty, particularly ones who have been employed for many years at their institution, can bring campus resources to radical CBL to extend the impact of what organizers and activists dream. For instance, when we brought students into protests surrounding a local Black man killed without provocation by the police, the faculty member reached out to a student with the artistic ability to create a graphic novel about what happened. Other students and community members contributed to the final product before the faculty member had it printed at the university. As this example shows, faculty can and should take the lead in offering ideas that can extend the impact, outreach, and influence of the community partner so that community needs and student learning can be seamlessly integrated and focused on what matters most to all.

## Conclusion

These challenging times in which people live call for bold action on the part of students, faculty and community members working together. We have argued here that CBL as it is often practiced has the potential to be and do more in many service-learning and community engagement-based courses. We have offered some insight into ways faculty can introduce radical CBL to develop students' capacities to be activists who are political and answerable to their communities. Doing so, we argue, results in better university-community partnerships that contribute to and model democratic practices.

In closing, we would be remiss if we did not say what we take for granted, namely that radical CBL learning needs to focus intentionally on the value of diversity, as demonstrated at a foundational level with readings written by authors of differing races and gender orientations and with partnerships that serve people who themselves may identify differently than the college cohort. Additionally, we find that following multiple news outlets allows faculty to make on-the-spot connections of readings, activist interventions, and current struggles. Finally, just as we remind students, we urge faculty to sustain their commitment to communities long after a project or a semester ends. The resources and talents to which the faculty have access are valuable to communities everywhere, but particularly those that are wealth-strapped. The pandemic, climate change, and numerous inequalities have caused activists around the world to push societies to the precipice of dramatic social change. Working together, hand-in-hand, faculty, students, and community partners together can take this opportunity to realize a better, more just world for all through the implementation of radical community-based learning.

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