

Developing students' authentic selves: Community organising modules at the University of Westminster, United Kingdom

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Keywords: *Higher Education; authentic learning; critical service-learning; vertically integrated projects; community organising.*

Introduction

This short update introduces a suite of community organising modules that are being delivered at the University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom (UK). These modules have been developed in partnership with Citizens UK and take inspiration from existing initiatives to embed community organising within the curriculum at other UK universities (see, for example, Anglia Ruskin University (n.d.), Newcastle University (2024) and University of Sussex (2024). Citizens UK are 'the UK's biggest, most diverse, and most effective people-powered alliance' who engage in community organising activity with the aim of 'bringing together everyday people and local organisations to build a better, fairer society' (Citizens UK, 2024). The modules aim to provide a deeply authentic learning experience for students. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, they allow students the opportunity to develop authentic relationships and their authentic selves during their time at university.

A critical service-learning approach

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The modules employ a critical service-learning approach. In general, service-learning is ‘an educational approach that combines learning objectives with community service to provide a practical, progressive learning experience while meeting societal needs’ (National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), 2023). Sometimes referred to within UK Higher Education (HE) as ‘engaged learning’ and ‘community-based learning’, service-learning has emerged in recent years as a powerful way of providing authentic learning opportunities for university students. For our current purposes, ‘authentic learning’ is defined as learning that is experiential, active, and applied, rather than abstract and theoretical (Pitchford, Owen and Stevens, 2022). Originally developed in the United States, service-learning is, increasingly, being integrated into the curricula of UK HE providers as part of a broader drive towards greater public engagement on the part of universities that also incorporates knowledge exchange, public engagement with research, and social and civic responsibility more generally (NCCPE, 2023). Critical service-learning is a type of service-learning that ‘stresses change within both the community and student’ and is, therefore, ‘explicitly political and social justice oriented and possesses a focus on critical reflection that enables both students and communities to act as agents of change’ (Pitchford, Owen and Stevens, 2022, p. 81). These characteristics align with the strategic objectives of both the University of Westminster and Citizens UK.

Authentic learning at the University of Westminster

The modules outlined above respond to a broader institutional agenda at the University of Westminster, whose current Education Strategy (University of Westminster, 2023) sets out a commitment to providing students with opportunities for authentic learning. The strategy builds on the definition provided above by characterising authentic learning as ‘episodes where learning is planned and structured with the intention of enabling students and colleagues to deploy their understanding and capabilities for the benefit of others’ (University of Westminster, 2023, p.10). The modules are situated within a broader set of authentic and service-learning initiatives at the university, such as a student-led legal advice clinic and live projects on several business courses where students work on briefs provided by external partners. These initiatives aim to ensure that students play an active role in constructing knowledge rather than being passive recipients of it. This type of learning allows students to have agency in their educational experience.

Module design

The community organising modules are offered at three levels. There is a Level 4 module called 'Introduction to Community Organising', a Level 5 module called 'Community Organising and Collective Action', and a Level 6 module called 'Community Organising and Leadership'. All are 20-credit modules. The Level 5 and Level 6 modules are year-long while the Level 4 module runs during the second (spring) semester. These 'elective' modules are part of a menu of institution-wide options for undergraduate students (see University of Westminster, 2024). Elective modules are defined as 'credit-bearing modules that will provide you with the opportunity to expand your professional skills and career development. They provide an opportunity to broaden your curriculum and might be in a different subject area from your main course of study' (University of Westminster, 2024).

The community organising modules are delivered as a Vertically Integrated Project (VIP). VIPs are 'a transformative approach to enhancing HE by engaging undergraduate and graduate students in ambitious, long-term, large-scale, multidisciplinary project teams that are led by faculty' (Coyle, 2019). The structure of VIPs is innovative, often running counter to traditional, modular, single level, classroom-based delivery and the expectations of students and staff for modules to be delivered in this way. For example, VIPs often involve students from different levels of study and different courses working together on projects and being present during the same learning episodes. The University of Strathclyde is notable for having established VIPs for a Sustainable Development education programme (University of Strathclyde, 2024). For our project, the VIP structure facilitates the inter-year student collaboration that engages learners in concepts and processes associated with community organising and can involve field visits, contributions to community events, and working within external community organisations.

The innovative structure of VIPs presented us with several challenges within the designing and implementation phase of the project. These challenges ranged from conceptual issues surrounding what teaching and learning should look like when adopting the VIP model, through to more practical matters such as timetabling the modules when we did not require a classroom every week. We have sought to address these challenges through the curriculum design process, treating the Levels 4, 5, and 6 modules almost as a mini course, rather than as three stand-alone modules.

It quickly became clear that attempting to develop the modules in isolation from one another was impractical. However, while coordinating the development of the modules, we realised that, although some students do attend at all levels, some engage with a community organising module at one level only. This means that the design must facilitate both a continuous developmental learning process for those students who attend iterations at different levels of the module while also offering a unique learning experience should a student attend at only one level.

To help address these issues, we adopted the 'ABC approach' to curriculum development in the creation of the module designs. This is an iterative, hands-on, storyboarding approach that allowed us to map the student learning journey across the three modules (Young and Perovic, 2024). We found this enabled us to integrate and build on the existing course content developed by Citizens UK while also considering the learning environment at the University of Westminster, and how students would engage with the modules at each level. It also enabled us to consider the different learning contexts and how students would interact with each other across different academic levels and within the project. This required a clear understanding of what is expected of the students on the different modules, how they interact, and the specific learning outcomes of each.

One of the conceptual challenges within the design process was ensuring that learning outcomes were constructed and assessed at an appropriate level for the different cohorts. This is, necessarily, more complex for VIP modules where students from different levels can be present in the same learning episode. For example, a key Level 6 learning outcome states that students completing the module will be able to 'lead and enhance the performance of teams engaged in community-organising activities'. This learning outcome is assessed by asking students to critically evaluate their experience of leadership within the module. By contrast, a key Level 4 learning outcome states that students completing the module will be able to 'apply team working and networking skills in an unfamiliar setting, making effective contributions to community projects and campaigns'. This learning outcome is assessed by asking students to produce a portfolio reflecting on their experiences of working in a team in a community setting.

While there is, by design, an overlap akin to a Venn diagram between the modules, it is within this space, working together,

that the students will construct and develop their learning towards the outcomes of the level they are undertaking. While we have identified challenges within the design process so far, it is clear that new and interesting pedagogical and teaching challenges will emerge through the delivery going forward and we will continue to learn alongside the students undertaking the modules and the partner organisations we are working with.

The experience so far

The modules ran for the first time during the 2024/25 academic year (though the Level 5 module did not run due to low enrolment) and at the time of writing, we are nearing the end of the first semester. So far, students have been introduced to some of the key concepts and methodologies of community organising and learned about the Citizens UK 'Five Steps to Social Change' methodology (see Figure 1). Through interactive workshops, students have had the opportunity to practise some of the key methods and tools of community organising including storytelling, listening, and negotiating. Bringing the theory to life, all classroom-based teaching has been based around real stories of wins by Citizens UK community leaders across the UK, illustrating how social change is possible when people come together.

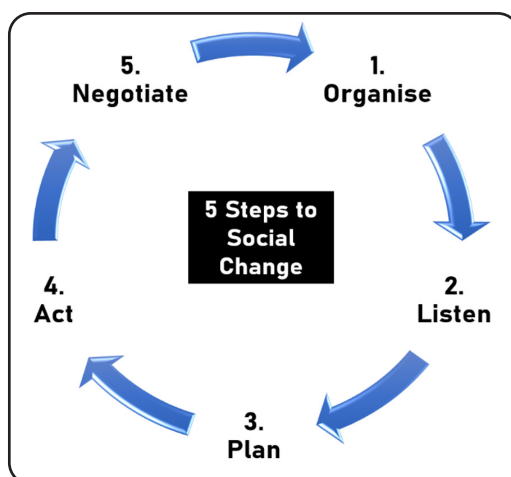


Figure 1. Five steps to social change (Citizens UK, 2024)

We have now entered the next stage of the module, which involves students planning, taking part in, and evaluating real cycles of action aimed at tackling social injustice – the first one focusing on the Living Wage. On 20 November 2024, supported by community leaders from the local Citizens Alliance and Living Wage Campaign (Citizens UK, 2024b), students conducted a very

successful research listening action. This involved walking around the area local to the University's Cavendish campus in Fitzrovia, London, and going into local businesses (pubs, cafes, retail shops, hotels – and even the BBC!) to talk to workers about their experiences of working in central London. The aim of this listening action was to gather information about pay and working conditions in the area and make connections with local workers. Students gathered information about around 25 local businesses and heard some compelling stories from workers on low pay who must work exceptionally long hours to make ends meet. This information and these stories will, in turn, be used to plan the next step in our cycle of action – a public action, during which students will hand letters to selected businesses asking them to consider accrediting as Living Wage employers.

Reflections on authenticity

Taking students out of the classroom and giving them the opportunity to participate in real-life campaigns for social change, the community organising modules clearly provide examples of authentic learning that is experiential, active, and applied. Undoubtedly, students are also learning practical skills in leadership, organising, and storytelling (to name a few) that will stand them in good stead for whatever careers they may embark on after university. From a perspective that sees authentic learning as synonymous with skills development and employability, these modules tick all the boxes.

On a more profound level, though, the community organising modules offer students the opportunity to develop their authentic selves in the context of more authentic relationships (with other students, with lecturers, with the wider community) than those usually experienced within the neoliberal university. Not only do students get to meet people they would not normally engage with within the university walls, but a core aspect of the module has also been to encourage students to reflect on, and practise telling, their own stories. What experiences do they bring with them? What have they learned? How do their own stories shape their involvement and inspire them to create change? Through telling their own stories and reflecting on their own interests, students learn how to connect with others based on shared interests and how to build the relational power that community organising thrives on. We have already heard some powerful stories from students about how their own experiences of social injustice inspired them to choose the module, and through the recent listening action, they were able

to draw on these experiences to connect with workers in the local area.

Over the course of the academic year, students will experience, first-hand, the challenges, obstacles, and frustrations of campaigns alongside the joy, elation, and hope that can be born out of working together with our neighbours to tackle social problems. Through this experience of living in, and being a key driver for, these campaigns, students will also be able to question the work they are doing. Is this the right route to create change? What is the best methodology for building power? Will we win? Each campaign will be unpredictable – we cannot say in advance if we will win or get to the negotiating table (the two key aims of community organising). What we can ensure is that students are ‘learning through doing’ and have space for growth through evaluation and supported development. Our overall aim is that by the end of the modules, students will feel empowered to lead collective action for social change in their communities and beyond. We look forward to exploring, in future publications, the extent to which this has happened.

Acknowledgements

The Editorial Board would like to thank Marion Sadoux for her collegiate generosity in supporting the reviewing of this piece.

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