Teaching Social Justice Activism through Radical Community-based Learning

Vincent Russell

Department of Communication, Western Carolina University

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Author Note

Vincent Russell https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5914-6918

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Vincent Russell, Western Carolina University, Department of Communication, 1 University Drive, Cullowhee, NC 28723 USA

Phone: +1 828-227-3850 Email: vrussell@wcu.edu

Abstract

Given the numerous crises facing the world, this essay argues that educators need to turn to the radical tradition to teach students social justice activism. Reflecting on my experience teaching social justice activism, the essay describes a pedagogical approach called radical community-based learning (CBL), wherein faculty and students partner with grassroots social movements, groups, and/or organizations to engage in political activism for social justice. Radical CBL promotes place-based consciousness and place-based activism so that students gain experience making material differences in their local communities. Through radical CBL, student learn theories and skill for community organizing, and faculty see themselves as inextricably linked with the communities in which they work and live. The essay offers an overview of radical CBL and provides resources for teaching social justice activism through radical CBL.

Keywords: community-based learning, service-learning, civic engagement, activism, social justice

Teaching Social Justice Activism through Radical Community-based Learning

"The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: Now is the time of monsters."

–Antonio Gramsci[1]

This past semester, in my Intercultural Communication course, I put the above quote from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci on the board and asked students to share what it meant to them. Most of the students had never heard of Gramsci—not to mention this quote—but they resonated deeply with Gramsci's words. From their seats, they used their phones to take pictures of the board so they could save the quote for later. Then, students began to share stories of the trials they and their loved ones have faced as they struggled in a dying world.

A student who is an undocumented immigrant from Central America described feeling like Sisyphus in his quest to pursue U.S. citizenship—trying to do all the "right" things to feel like he "belonged" in the United States—but knowing that any chance encounter with law enforcement could result in his detention and deportation. No matter how hard he worked, like Sisyphus, his goal of citizenship and belonging always felt out of reach.

Other students talked about dealing with health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our university recently had lifted indoor mask mandates, despite the virus still raging across the country. One student with an autoimmune disorder feared that she might catch COVID-19 by coming to class and that it would kill her. Another student talked about her mother, who was diagnosed with cancer and taking immunosuppressant drugs. She worried she might bring COVID-19 home from, thereby putting her mother's life in danger. Nearly every single student in the class knew someone who had died from the disease.

[1] I quote from a liberal translation of Gramsci popularized by Žižek (2010). A more literal translation is "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

A gay student talked about instances of homophobia he experienced on campus, and a Jewish student spoke about fearing for his safety and no longer wearing his kippah in public because of antisemitic remarks made toward him. Several Black students and other students of color talked about frequently seeing Confederate battle flags around campus and in the nearby community, making them nervous to be alone at night.

Then, the conversation started to shift. After relaying so many heart wrenching stories of hardship and struggle, the students began to talk about their efforts to midwife the new world Gramsci described. They were joining local activist groups, they organized and attended Black Lives Matter protests, they volunteered in community gardens to fight food insecurity, they worked election campaigns to help elect politicians who cared about the public good, and some were involved in launching a union drive among food workers on campus.

As students shared their struggles, they began to realize a consensus in the class: They wanted to do even more to realize a new world—one free of oppression, where all people could fulfill their potential. They recognized their responsibility to care for each other and their communities, but they wanted to know: What more can we do? No single answer will suffice, but the one I offer in this brief essay is that students must learn how to bring Gramsci's "new world" into existence, and that the responsibility of instructors is to teach students the tools of organizing, of activism for social justice, so that all of us may become the doulas of a socially just world.

The pedagogical approach I use in teaching activism for social justice and that I offer in this article is that of radical community-based learning (CBL), which "involves faculty and students partnering with grassroots social movements, groups, and/or organizations to engage in political activism for social justice" (Russell & Jovanovic, 2023, p. 6). In this paper, I explain

why pedagogues need to be more radical in their approaches, and then offer a summary of radical CBL, including some of its tenets, content offered through radical CBL, and recommended texts for readers interested in implementing radical CBL.

My social location informs my pedagogical approach and is worth considering. I am a white, cisgendered, heterosexual male living and working inside the U.S. imperial core, a fraught social location because the U.S. Empire is responsible for much oppression around the globe, and my identity is socially privileged in this cultural hegemony. I work at Western Carolina University (WCU), a midsize regional institution in rural, southern Appalachia, a region with some of the highest poverty rates in the United States, and located in a state that, by some measures, barely qualifies as a democracy.[2] Most of the students in my classes live, work, and pray in the nearby hills and hollers, often coming from small, conservative mountain communities. Approximately 40% of students at WCU are first-generation, and, even though the student population is 78% white, students often describe the campus as the most diverse and open-minded place they ever have been.[3] With this context in mind, I next detail why instructors need to be more radical in teaching social justice activism.

On the Need for Radical Pedagogy

The intersecting inequalities related to race, class, gender, ability, nationality, and sexuality provide some examples to illustrate the context in which young people today are coming of age, leading to historic popular uprisings around the world in summer 2020. For instance, in 2019, income inequality in the United States reached its highest disparity since the

[2] A researcher at the Electoral Integrity Project explained: "If it were a nation state, North Carolina would rank right in the middle of [global rankings for electoral integrity] – a deeply flawed, partly free democracy that is only slightly ahead of the failed democracies that constitute much of the developing world" (Reynolds, 2016, para. 4).
[3] For instance, typically, each semester, at least one student shares in class that they had never met someone who was openly LGBTQ until they attended WCU.

Census Bureau started recording it in the 1950s (Telford, 2019). Wealth inequality remains a global problem, too, for, as of 2019, the world's 2,153 billionaires possessed more wealth than 60% of the planet's population; and the 22 richest men in the world have more wealth than all the women in Africa (Coffey et al., 2020). In the United States, income inequality has resulted in 41% of children living in low-income families, with children over-represented among the nation's poor—comprising 23% of the total population but 32% of all people in poverty; the highest rates are among Black, Latinx, and American Indian children (Koball & Jiang, 2018).

Meanwhile, the threat of global annihilation due to climate change looms. In January 2020, scientists changed the Doomsday Clock—a globally recognized indicator of the world's vulnerability to catastrophe—to reflect 100 seconds to midnight because of increased threats from climate change, nuclear war, and cyber-enabled information warfare (Science and Security Board, 2020). This change was the closest the clock has been to the metaphorical end of the world since the clock's creation in 1947. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2021), some trends in climate change are now irreversible, while others, such as deteriorating air quality, will require decades to stabilize through reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. To avoid climate catastrophe, global greenhouse gas emissions must peak before 2025, be reduced by 43% by 2030, and reach net zero in the early 2050s. *The old world is dying*.

In the United States, young people thus grapple with economic uncertainty of racial capitalism and the threat of climate disaster while growing up amid perpetual war. The so-called Global War on Terror began in 2001, meaning some soldiers in the U.S. military today are fighting in that war, despite being born after the September 11 terrorist attacks that initiated this latest chapter in U.S. imperial expansion. The U.S. Empire marches ahead with militaristic and economic warfare, subjecting millions of people around the world to repression and violence.

The threat of nuclear war continues, too, with the possibility of all life on Earth extinguished in mere minutes. *Now is the time of monsters*.

In response to these crises, the relationship of people to their government has changed. An analysis of the World Values Survey found that, from the 1990s to the 2010s in the United States, approval of authoritarian governance systems increased, approval of democratic governing systems decreased, and political apathy increased (Foa & Mounk, 2016). Furthermore, nearly half of U.S. Americans (45%) reported in 2018 that they were not at all engaged civically or politically (Jones et al., 2018).

Despite these troubling statistics, recent years have seen increased numbers of groups and campaigns advocating for social justice, such as the Yellow Vest movement in France, the Hong Kong movement for democratic autonomy from mainland China, the anti-austerity movements across Latin America, Women's Marches worldwide, and the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. Increasingly, young people are performing political activism to address the unprecedented social inequities that have defined much of their upbringing. The post-pandemic uprisings in favor of abolishing police, canceling rent, providing healthcare for all, eliminating student debt, and freeing all prisoners demonstrate that these young people are imagining a more just world and willing to take direct action to realize it. *The new world struggles to be born*.

Institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to respond to the needs and interests of students who, though ready to be active civic agents, can benefit from understanding the history surrounding social change processes, as well as how their academic instruction has the potential to further the pursuit of ethical and just ends. Faculty are well suited to connect "curricular content . . . with the very specific, place-based, and experience-oriented content of

community partnerships" to provide robust and meaningful community engagement (Jovanovic et al., 2017, p. 27).

Given these daunting crises facing humanity, it is time for instructors to turn toward the radical tradition—a tradition that seeks to address root causes of injustice, such as abolishing prisons or expelling colonizers. It is time for us to revisit the language of *revolution*, channeling historic people's movements that (re)birthed democracy, for the evidence suggests that society needs revolutionary changes, and it needs them now. We need a radical, revolutionary spirit to carry us into a new, just world, and we need to be teaching students in that spirit. Radical CBL is one approach that does just that.

Radical Community-based Learning

In radical CBL, faculty, students, and community partners work in concert to engage in political activism for social justice (Russell & Jovanovic, 2023). The approach is rooted in radical love (Freire, 1970)—love of self, love of the Other, and love of community—and answerability (Patel, 2016). Radical CBL teaches a blend of participatory and justice-oriented 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" (Russell & Jovanovic, 2023, p. 6).

In radical CBL, instructors are concerned, primarily, with local community concerns, while recognizing those concerns often are connected to global issues. Thus, radical CBL promotes what the renowned organizer Grace Lee Boggs (2015) called *place-based consciousness* and *place-based activism* for social justice, which requires that we "come together

around common, local experiences and organize around our hopes for the future of our communities and cities" (p. 56), while promoting community, solidarity, and transformational social movements among a local populace. To foster place-based consciousness, I assign, whenever possible, readings about local activist history so that students come to understand the sociopolitical context in which they hope to intervene. Students, understandably, may feel overwhelmed by the national and global forces of oppression I described earlier, which is why providing opportunities to learn and practice activism in their local communities offers an opening to prefigure a more just world while simultaneously contributing to the creation of that world. It is the grassroots—this "politics from below"—that holds such promise, for "the work of building new forms of life can happen nowhere else" (Loggins, 2022, p. 33).

The local focus of radical CBL is vital for the project of democracy, and for teaching students social justice activism. It is in the local that national and global forces are made real, such as when many students in the United States saw COVID vaccines and tests unjustly under distributed in their communities. Similarly, the local is where students can more readily rally support for a cause, and then see, feel, and witness how the quality of life changes when they stop a neighborhood school from closing, implement a participatory budgeting process in their town, improve abortion access in their community, help workers in the nearby paper mill form a union, or promote LGBTQ-affirming curricula in their public schools.

In radical CBL, teaching disciplinary content becomes secondary to the goal of educating students to be agents of change in their communities, because the skills for democratic participation remain similar across issue categories, whether one is fighting for universal healthcare, prison abolition, or climate justice. Radical CBL teaches social justice activism by teaching theories and skills necessary for community organizing and direct, collective political

action.[4] Through this approach, instructors partner with extant activist groups in local communities so that students apply what they learn in the classroom to actual social justice campaigns.

Radical CBL strives to deconstruct the false dichotomy between "the university" and "the community" by recognizing that faculty and students already are active members of multiple communities, and that faculty and students may come from the same underserved communities in which radical CBL seeks to intervene (McCann, 2020). Faculty, as the ones who design and implement curricula, have an outsized responsibility to aid in the deconstruction of that false dichotomy by, for instance, extending their instruction beyond the university campus. Faculty can organize and host teach-ins that are open to the public; they can go to the places where oppressed peoples are by teaching in prison (e.g., Inside-Out prison education programs), by permitting community members to enroll in the course (Bloch-Schulman et al., 2015), or, in Appalachia, visiting the front porches and churches of rural towns. These efforts are done in service of aiding people in reading the word and the world (Freire, 1970), as well as resisting the ongoing atomization of communities by neoliberal, racial capitalism. After all, the most oppressed and exploited classes, the ones most on the margins of society, are the ones who will become the agents of revolutionary change (Robinson, 2020), and, therefore, are the ones most in need of engagement by faculty and students through radical CBL.

Conclusion

The challenges we face are stark, but humanity has faced historic ruptures before. Writing nearly a century ago, the leftist educator George Counts (1932) looked out on a world ravaged by the Great Depression, with fascism rearing its monstrous head in Europe and the

[4] Some readings I have found helpful in teaching community organizing include: Alinsky (1971), Abujbara et al. (2017), Del Gandio (2008), Minieri and Getsos (2007), and Shaw (2013).

United States: “We live in troublous times; we live in an age of profound change; we live in an age of revolution. Indeed it is highly doubtful whether man [*sic*] ever lived in a more eventful period than the present” (p. 28). Despite the oppressive realities, Counts saw that moment as possessing incredible potential, continuing, “The present situation is also freighted with hope and promise. The age is pregnant with possibilities. There lies within our grasp, the most humane, the most beautiful, the most majestic [society] ever fashioned by any people” (p. 32).

Much like Counts and his contemporaries, we, too, face historic oppression and exploitation, but also opportunities for revolutionary shifts toward justice and beauty. Writing earlier this year, Loggins (2022) explained, “Current oppressive conditions cannot be altered in one fell swoop. Yet . . . countercultures . . . and . . . acts of . . . resistance . . . help keep open the door of possibility. Freedom is not inevitable . . . but it is only through struggle with others that this freedom is made possible in the first place” (pp. 35–36). The time is ripe for teaching social justice activism—of teaching students the importance of struggling with others toward freedom—and radical CBL is one approach that can help students deliver that new world struggling to be born, a world rooted in revolutionary love, joy, and justice.

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