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Community organising in higher education: activist community-engaged learning in geography

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the transformative potential of place-based community organizing as a theory and practice of progressive social change and as a critical approach to the social purpose of community engagement in Higher Education Institutions. The aim is to expose power asymmetries and civic renewal “from below” through a focus on community engaged learning, specifically community organizing on the curriculum for geography undergraduates. The empirical focus is an English university, but the issues and observations are widespread. Around the world, students are coping with disruptions following a global pandemic, austerity, and loss of trust in local democracy – participating in climate emergency and racial justice movements. This paper advances community organising and community engaged learning as a mutually co-constitutive challenge to conventional notions of the student as a passive consumer of recruitment, learning, and individualised notions of civic responsibility. Methods of community organising are based on the theory that if you want change, you need power: change ultimately traces a motivational journey from anger to agitation and action. Empirical vignettes explore the transformative role of emotionally stirring “political theatre” and direct action, while exposing tensions that arise due to the transitory status of students in place and time.

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Introduction

The neoliberalization of higher education since the 1990s has amplified tensions between a fiercely competitive market model, and claims that civic universities can (or should) function as socially productive anchor institutions. These tensions have increased since 2020 in the wake of a global pandemic and, in the UK context, austerity government policies since 2010 that shifted the cost of higher education further from the state to the individual. This reality is increasingly at odds with the rhetoric of civic universities on community engagement. Below, I shed new light on this tension by critically engaging with community organising and activism on the curriculum of geography in higher education. The issues that arise should be of general relevance for educators wanting to

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expand anti-oppressive, social justice focused education. I choose to define community organising narrowly in this context to distinguish specified higher education partnerships and methods of non-violent direct action from ad hoc civic engagement and charitable initiatives. This challenges the tendency, in both pedagogic and policy discourse, to gloss over ambiguous intentions and beneficiaries when “community” “engagement” and “organising” are loosely defined. This is like the call for clarity made with respect to determining university research and teaching “impact” (Evans, 2016).

I explore asymmetric relationships of power and purpose to suggest that “organising for change” can offer mutual benefits to students, universities, and a broad alliance of place-based civic partners. I thus contribute to well-rehearsed debates on the place of the civic university and of community engaged learning (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2013; Watson et al., 2011). This is where students participate in organised community activities that are integrated into formal curricula and assessed for credit (Bednarz et al., 2008, p. 88). Arguably, some forms of community engagement challenge structural inequalities and oppression more actively than others. To make this point, I present findings from a case study of community engaged learning at Newcastle University, UK, where geography students have been able to access the *emotionally stirring* “habits of action” bound up with community organising since 2016. The case study comprises multiple sources of module-specific data for student cohorts and civic partners, 2016–2021. It shows that students feel empowered to advance their activist goals when learning is explicitly conceived as a theory and method of social change (Grant, 2021, p. 109; Green et al., 2021).

The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate the teaching practice or content of the case study described. Indeed, I introduce a critical pedagogy framework below to dismantle hierarchies usually present in both teacher-taught and university-civil society power dynamics. Instead, the empirical analysis highlights the benefits of community organising for student personal development, for university social purpose, and for public pedagogy. I also present findings that reveal persistent barriers to widespread and inclusive access for students to develop as active, participatory citizens.

The idea of student citizens “organising for change” appears both familiar and appealing. There are nevertheless important distinctions between “organising” and “developing” across a wide variety of community-based volunteering and learning placement practices. De Filippis et al. (2010:10) acknowledge a continuum of approaches, noting that competing ideas of community and community-based work arise throughout history, around the world. Nine models of community organising are identified by one source. Each represent “the work of bringing people together to take action around their common concerns and to overcome social injustice” (Community Organisers, n.d., p. 10). Common features include “listening to, connecting, and motivating people (across a broad alliance) to build their collective power to effect change” (Community Organisers, n.d., p. 10).

Citizens UK is singled out for attention from this framework because universities have been key partners in regional chapters in recent years (Citizens UK, 2022: oral comm.). Indeed, there is an emerging body of scholarship advancing university community organising with Citizens UK as part of a “civic turn” (Bolton, 2017; Grant, 2021; Wills, 2012). While the first university partnership with a Citizens UK chapter began in 1996, most have developed since 2010 (Newcastle University in 2015). This is striking because

it coincides with a period of austerity and disinvestment in civil society, and the negative impact on student and university finance of student loans and fees (raised from £3000 to £9000 in 2010 in England and Wales, not Scotland)¹ (Wills, 2009). From 125 universities located across England and Wales, 21 (1 in 6) are paying members of a regional chapter of Citizens UK (Asfa, 2022; Citizens UK, 2022 oral comm.). Some represent strategic partnerships where community organising is embedded to some extent in teaching, research, and institutional development. Others pursue targeted collaboration such as widening access and participation to disadvantaged groups.

While the empirical focus is an English University, the issues and observations from this paper have wider resonance. Around the world, students are coping with disruptions caused by a global pandemic, they are participating in climate emergency and racial justice movements, witnessing deepening challenges to democratic institutions, and in many cases feeling angry and hopeless (Klocker et al., 2021; Mitrea et al., 2021). The model of broad-based alliance discussed here corresponds with practices employed by the US Industrial Areas Foundation, rooted in the writing of Saul Alinsky and Ernesto Cortez and the legacy of the civil rights movement (Shragge, 2013). Moreover, common elements of community organising can be identified across various forms of “public action learning”, not limited to Citizens UK (Annette, 2009).

The article is structured in four parts. The first part offers further context on the pressures and contradictions underpinning community engagement and activist organising in higher education. Then, I explain the methods and observations used to develop the case study context of Newcastle University and Tyne and Wear Citizens. Third, empirical vignettes are presented and discussed to reveal transformative aspects of student learning in practice. These highlight the influence of emotional awareness and inner authority and how anger and hope propel active learning and social change in tandem.

The concluding section draws out significant features of relational power in community organising that differ from familiar expectations of student volunteering and project learning. As Bunyan (2010, p. 115) observes, the vague and hollow language associated with “empowerment” and “partnership” has increasingly displaced scrutiny of power: partnerships only make sense when understood within the context of this capacity – otherwise they serve to consolidate existing hierarchies. Authentic partnership exists when there is a closer power approximation between the partners (Bunyan, 2010, p. 115). As Arnie Graf (2020, p. 19) explains in the “universals” of community organising: “power is the reason for building any broad-based organization . . . the root of this word (being) ‘the ability to act’ – a very positive quality, especially for people who are ignored or oppressed” (Graf, 2020, p. 19).

Civic engagement and public values in university education

Commitment to some form of community or civic engagement in university research and teaching is widely apparent in the “mission” of universities around the world (Sydnor et al., 2021). Outward-facing statements typically evolve to promote shifting institutional reputation and societal goals. For example, the University of Bologna’s mission to “transform the world for People, Peace, the Planet, Prosperity and Partnerships” is closely aligned with the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development

Goals (SDG) (Paletta & Bonoli, 2019, p. 501). In the UK context, universities must demonstrate “public benefit” to justify their tax-exempt charitable status. While these legal requirements are met by educational purpose, expectations go further to include “helping society to flourish beyond the confines of their own campuses” (Charity Commission, 2019). Newcastle University is quintessentially “civic” in terms of its mission and geographic location. The Vice Chancellor launched a new Vision & Strategy in 2018 comprising four cross-cutting strategies: Education for Life, Research for Discovery and Impact, Engagement and Place, and Global. This was reaffirmed in 2022 to emphasise values-led civic engagement. A “graduate skills framework” outlines five areas of competency including “social and civic contributions” that align with the university Vision and Education Strategy. This emphasises instrumental employability and skills alongside “holistic development” “to make a positive difference for people, community and planet” (Newcastle University, 2018).

As “strong societal actors,” universities are in a unique position to embed societal goals and values, such as SDGs, in the curriculum and through the civic engagement practices of teaching staff and management (Cuesta-Claros et al., 2021). Moreover, universities animate their “place in the world” by attracting students with deep concern to tackle interconnected social, ecological and climate crises (Mori Junior et al., 2019). Arguably, radical potential exists for higher education assets, including student learning, to strengthen civic renewal and to deepen democracy. Yet, the context in which universities claim local impact through community engagement is problematic and fraught with contradiction. Since the 1990s, scope for meaningful and mutually beneficial engagement has been squeezed by austerity and the shift from public to private funding. There is little incentive with market ideology to challenge highly individualised notions of “productivity” and “responsibility” that reinforce the power of state and market forces (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2013). The “purpose” and “passion” necessary for civic renewal and social change tend to be side-lined. Instead, student recruitment and public relations emphasise instrumental private benefits of graduate skills measured by employment destinations. Students are encouraged by mounting debt² to behave like consumers rather than to regard themselves as “caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality” as agents of structural change (to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr.) (Graf, 2020).

This critique is well made by Jonathan Grant (2021) who advocates that neoliberal universities dismantle the rhetorical “window dressing” of the current impact agenda to deliver real social purpose (Grant, 2021, p. 77; Watson et al., 2011). Clarity of language and meaning is crucial because the proliferation of warm words, competing motivations, and fuzzy definitions frequently gloss over structural inequalities and the relative vulnerability of individual students and the student body, staff on a variety of sometimes precarious contracts, and community segmentations that amplify unequal power relations, linked to global challenges. Advancing on this critique, this paper outlines practical ways to develop student participation in social change activism.

Community engaged learning

Civic engagement typically relates to a realm of voluntary and community organisations and big and small charities, variously described as the charitable sector, the voluntary sector, the not-for-profit sector, the social sector, or the third sector: “each title describes

one or some parts, but none quite encompasses them all, although what they have in common is a social, philanthropic or charitable motivation in the widest sense” (Cook & Mason, 2021, p. 15). These different ways of describing a realm that is neither state nor market-driven say nothing about the direction of power or purpose. By contrast the term “civil society” invites scrutiny of democratic process. Arguably, “what” constitutes civic engagement (and what a university is for) must be qualified by “who” “how” and “why” (Simms & Holgate, 2010). Therefore, I advance community organising methods that “reweave the fabric of civil society” (Wood, 2020).

Various terms are also used to describe what is pedagogically distinct within trends of credit-bearing community engaged learning in higher education. This breadth of practice has led to some confused priorities, not least between teachers in different disciplines, career services, and university managers. Prominent terms include practical, active, project-based, work-based, participatory, and experiential. Some of these approaches prioritise action-research and co-production while others emphasise charitable service, volunteering, and employability (Cohen, 2006).

Local urban and rural voluntary work is well established in geography higher education practice, through a range of individual and group projects and placements (Bednarz et al., 2008; Buckingham-Hatfield, 1995). Terms such as “community geography” and “geographies of practice” amplify the benefits of experiential learning that are already found in the status of expeditions and fieldwork that make geography distinct (Healey & Jenkins, 2000). Rees et al. (2020, p. 36) use the term “community geography” to convey not only commitment to the rigours of real-world fieldwork, as with participatory theories and methods, but also activities of public pedagogy that arise from reciprocal relationships with external organisations. Recent contributions in this field are increasingly critical of asymmetric power dynamics framing graduate placements (Barcus & Trudeau, 2018). Critics challenge the situation whereby “aligning the institutional needs of the university with the needs and demands of local communities” results in *either* students gaining experience *in* the community or the university delivering expertise *to* the community (Rees et al., 2020).

Sandlin et al. (2017) argue that all efforts to integrate learning in civic engagement should be underpinned by public pedagogies that cultivate empathy and social responsibility. Benefits should spill over into civil society and public debate, helping to settle disagreements between opposing groups and points of view (DeFilippis et al., 2010, p. 6). As Pyles (2014, pp. 17–19) observes, “an organiser must be a student of self-awareness . . . a student who understands the various ways that oppression gets played out in people’s lives . . . and a student of their own mind, personal history, fears, and hopes”. Therefore, I advance community organising as a mutually co-constitutive “journey” of social change work. For education to be transformative, it must arise from a real-world environment of social interaction. A fitting metaphor for this is found in the poetry of William Butler Yeats: “Education is not the filling of a bucket but the starting of a fire” (Poirier, 2017). In the context of active learning, the fire is an emotional stirring that transforms hope, anger, fear, and anxiety into action, developing the inner authority of the individual while finding and building common ground with others in powerful relationships. In short, I advance a definition of “activist” engaged learning that is values-led and transformative as a process of learning by doing (Healey and Jenkins 2000; Kolb, 2015).

A continuum of transformative partnership and engagement

Pyles (2014) and others usefully locate community organising at one end of a continuum of transformative education and external partnership, as one approach to community engaged learning. The literature suggests three discrete points on this continuum: (i) volunteering for charity, (ii) advocating for justice, (iii) organising to win social change. Organising methods and training seek to convince people that they have problem solving abilities sufficient to change their community, calling institutions that block necessary progress to account. In community organising and mutual aid literature there is a popular metaphor for this: “If you give someone a fish, you feed them for a day. If you teach them to fish, you feed them for a lifetime” (Bolton, 2017, p. 90). This approach similarly enables students to develop their own inner authority and problem-solving abilities.

Efforts to develop mutually beneficial external partnerships and collaborative projects are challenging and will vary by location and institutional context. This is one reason why community organising remains under-developed on the undergraduate curriculum. While I am not advocating a one-size model, I make the case for advancing “social change” partnerships. This is not to dismiss the role and value of charitable services, volunteering, social justice advocacy and other ways that students gain from “learning by doing” including leadership opportunities within their Students Union. Community development scholars argue that it is better to view different forms of non-profit activity on a continuum of cooperation, recognising that organising can flourish alongside service-oriented urban regeneration initiatives tasked with improving the physical fabric of low-income neighbourhoods (Pierson, 2001, p. 91). Moreover, many volunteer activities contribute learning outcomes that involve personal growth, self-confidence and a range of key skills and capabilities (Elsdon, 1995; Khasanzyanova, 2017).

Methodology and critical pedagogy

The findings of this paper draw on a case study of a community organising partnership between Newcastle University and Tyne and Wear Citizens. The author’s involvement in this partnership gave rise to a suite of modules intended to advance an active, experiential model of community engaged learning for geography undergraduates. Year-long options include a co-taught first-time module (the focus of this paper), as well as an advanced version that allows the returning student to develop their activism further.

The case study design and geography teaching described here are influenced by critical pedagogy: collective leadership, peer learning, and non-hierarchical communities of practice. These ideas derive from seminal texts by Paulo Freire (1972) and Etienne Wenger (1998). In the classroom, the aim of critical pedagogy is to dismantle the teacher-student power dynamics that hold some people and knowledge production above others. In the community, the ethical concerns of action research “involve people as actors rather than passive objects of a study” (Herron & Mendiweso-Bendek, 2018). Action research and critical pedagogy thrive in a community of practice where relationships of trust, listening, experiential learning, and decisions by consensus are ongoing concerns for all. According to Wenger (1998, p. 5) a community of practice is a “group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn and how to do it better as

they interact regularly”. These ideas are foundational to the case study partnership because Citizens UK identifies as a learning organisation (Citizens UK, 2022 oral comm.). Therefore, classroom activities replicate the circular seating arrangement and conscientious listening practiced in community organising.

The case study partnership emphasizes a slow, intentional, and inclusive approach to building power and leadership (Massaro et al., 2021). This contrasts with project management methods and transactional relationships advanced by the neoliberal leadership industry (Pierson, 2001). Students on this module begin their experiential journey by “unlearning” instrumentally defined knowledge and assessment goals. This legitimizes the experiences and knowledge of students from underrepresented groups who might otherwise lack confidence to raise their voice in class (VandeSteege, 2012). The case study student cohort typically reflect the familiar portrait of a “Russell Group” English university outside of London: mostly white and middle class (Bryson & Todd, 2021, p. 246). It is nevertheless apparent that university community organising disproportionately appeals to so-called non-traditional students including those who are the first in their family to pursue higher education (see also Massaro et al., 2021).

Tyne and Wear Citizens

Tyne and Wear Citizens was founded in 2015 when five anchor civic institutions, including Newcastle University, pooled money to fund an organiser. The success of this relational approach is such that there are now 32 member institutions organising together in broad-based alliance. It was not clear at the start whether the methods of Citizens UK would work in North East England, yet the need for change was urgent (Bryson & Todd, 2021, p. 235). The regional context is poor and politically remote, and the local voluntary and community sector has suffered disproportionately from austerity and declining civic engagement. The success of Citizens UK in London since 1989 led to the formation of the Living Wage Foundation. The argument for organising on this issue was compelling in Tyne and Wear. The area has one of the highest proportions of employees earning below the living wage in the UK: 22.5% in 2020 (Living Wage Foundation, 2020).

Citizens UK training and methods are based on the theory that if you want change, you need power: change ultimately traces a *motivational journey* from anger to agitation and action (Alinsky, 1971; Pierson, 2001). The idea is for people with shared interests to take on established authority figures, such as elected members of parliament, and heads of large public and private bodies. A broad-based alliance of civil society organisations (representing faith, education, trade union and marginalised community groups) can use community organising methods to tackle a wide variety of issues such as climate change, housing, public health, poverty, discrimination, and the like. Many of these issues are local expressions of global challenges whereby people work together to get things done (Bolton, 2017). The Newcastle University partnership with Tyne and Wear Citizens has enabled any student or member of staff to undertake training to run listening campaigns and to achieve real change. Examples include higher wages and dignity at work for the lowest paid workers, action to tackle hate crime with a focus on improving safety in public spaces and public transport, and action through national government and mental health concerns to get more state schools to make school-based counselling accessible to all children and young people (Bryson & Todd, 2021, pp. 240–5).

Data collection and interpretation: responsibility and positionality

Table 1 identifies the data sources used to interpret individual and collective student and partner accounts of community engaged learning over the period 2016–2021. The case study comprises empirical data collected for the functions of external partnership and informal module evaluation (data sets 1b and 1c), and that which arose from three co-produced action-research projects funded by Newcastle University (1a, 1d, and 1e). The last of these was designed in response to a global pandemic when it was necessary to adapt the aims of critical pedagogy to the constraints of remote synchronous and asynchronous online collaboration.

Data include online surveys with open-ended responses. Basic information is gathered each year before, during, and after each module has ended. Students are invited to share their expectations, motivations, and concerns to check learning and satisfaction in real-time. The survey has evolved to include questions about engagement in protest and campaigning organisations. This follows evidence of a rising level of shared political consciousness amongst students at English universities in recent years (Hopkins & Todd, 2015; Porter, 2020). These methods are well-established in fields of geography and pedagogy.

The author took ultimate responsibility for securing ethics approval (as Module Leader, and Principal Investigator), annually in the case of the course structure and external partnerships, while at the same time knowingly involving students in this process as participant collaborators. Data collected via online surveys (1.c) provided data protection statements that used minimal personally identifying information with scope for students to withhold or withdraw consent. This approach advocates open-ended ethical scrutiny because community organising methods and leadership training do not conform to conventional classifications of “teaching” or “research”. This aligns with a continual process of learning and *unlearning* that is the collective responsibility of teachers, students, and

Table 1. Summary of multiple data collection participant/source and methodology 2016–2021.

Data Ref.	Participant/collaborator focus	Cohort/period of observation.	Data collection source and methodology
1.a	Students	February 2017 (<i>n</i> = 8)	Group dialogues transcribed to capture individual and collective experience of community engagement over the previous five months
1.b	External organisers and civic partnerships	May 2017 May 2018 (<i>n</i> = 5)	Oral and written feedback from external partner organisation (primary contact) to explore lessons learned for mutually beneficial relationships.
1.c	Students	2017/18–2020/21 (Total <i>n</i> = 86)	Pre-entry questionnaire. Open-ended responses from four student cohorts, each questioned on their experience and expectations of community engagement.
1.d	Students, paid organisers, alliance members, and civic activists.	2016–2021	Composite vignettes derived from personal communications and printed materials sourced from multiple training workshops (including 2-day 2016, 6-day 2018), continuous leadership development, in-person and online (2018–2021), and multiple CO action (Reclaim the Metro, Just Change, Just Transition and others).
1.e	As above, plus paid student action research interns	September 2020 – July 2021.	Newcastle University funded action research to promote social connectedness (with community organising) during the COVID-19 crisis. Data collection and methods as above, plus anonymised transcript of online symposium (<i>n</i> = 40 student community organisers and civic partners) to pool experiences at the end of the academic year.

community organisers alike (VandeSteege, 2012: 29). Students seek consent from the community leaders they work with, and the author seeks consent from student peer learners. Students, staff, and community leaders take collective responsibility for these ethical standards (notably 1.a., 1.e). Additional data sources include audio-recorded individual and group dialogue, and reflective outputs, variously accounting for multiple participants (students, non-student volunteers, community leaders, activist-scholars). I draw on this data synthetically by theme, presenting accounts anonymously in an aggregated form of composite vignette. This represents a novel methodological contribution to the field.

The method and technique of composite vignette provides a means of ensuring anonymity for individuals participating in identifiable projects and campaigns of direct action. I use this method to succinctly convey the rich complexity of democratic action and civic renewal where hope and anger are embedded in lived experience. The empirical discussion highlights discrete stages in a cycle of research, action, and evaluation, including an extensive “listening campaign” led by students and community partners to establish priority issues that find common ground in fear, anger, and motivation to “make change”. This process led to Newcastle University accrediting as a Living Wage employer in 2019, a tangible outcome of the case study partnership. These vignettes incorporate real situations and people but in composite form, based upon numerous observations drawn from multiple sources of oral and written accounts identified in [Table 1](#) (specifically 1.d). The vignette technique is well established in anthropology where it serves a rhetorical purpose (Spalding & Phillips, 2007) but this method of communicating motivational journeys and transformational practices of community engaged learning is likely to be new to readers of this journal.

Motivational journeys: commitment to social change

The students in this study typically begin their journey into community organising with a conventional image of charitable volunteering in mind. This is evident from the results of the “pre-entry” online survey (1.c.). [Box A](#) presents a concise summary of open-ended responses from four student cohorts, each questioned on their previous experience and expectations.

It is rare for the students in this study to have any experience of community organising prior to university, but most are familiar with advocating for justice. They frequently claim to have signed online petitions for grassroots campaign groups such as Change.org (widely used in the UK) and petitions created on the UK Government and Parliament web sites (5 signatures from eligible citizens required to get started; at 10K signatures petitions get a response from government; at 100K signatures petitions are debated in parliament). Chris Packham, well known conservation activist, has launched several petitions – and claims that their merit should not be dismissed, because even when they do not result in change, they do excite and shape public debate (Gov, 2021).

The summaries in [Box A](#) add weight to anecdotal evidence of students arriving at university already involved in campaigning groups such as Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and the like. Cole and Heinecke (2020, p. 90) suggest in the US context that student activism is more visible and projected to grow in future years. They link this to growing concern for social and racial justice and civic universities flourishing as sites of resistance to neoliberalism in the academy (see also Preston & Aslett, 2014). This suggests

Box A. student experience, motivations, and expectations of community engagement from pre-entry survey, 2017–2021 (representing on-line engaged learning format in 2020/21)

2020/21	Selected phrases from free-text survey responses	N = cohort of 26
	<p>Previous experience: “weekly volunteering” “regular volunteering, fundraising and campaigning” (14 mentions) with explicit reference to “Covid-19 response activity” (6 mentions), “work experience at national elections (counts), digital activism, regular volunteer in local nature conservation (and) future career in voluntary sector” “volunteering (and) experience of leadership with environmental group” (5 mentions) including “to raise awareness of the importance of sustainable fashion” “member of Extinction Rebellion” and “fundraising for national charities (and) campaigning on climate change, plastic waste and social equality issues” (4 mentions).</p> <p>Motivations: “keen to make a difference beyond university (and) to be more active in local community off campus” (3 mentions), interested in learning about wider voluntary sector” (3 mentions), “keen to apply skills of digital activism” (2 mentions) and “looking to pursue voluntary service overseas”</p> <p>“passionate to agitate on environmental and social change” (3 mentions) and on “humanitarian and animal rights issues” “passionate about helping drive social change through grassroots . . . currently tackling austerity within benefits system . . . feminist activist” (aware of Tyne and Wear Citizens).</p>	
2019/20	Selected phrases from free-text survey responses	N = cohort of 24
	<p>Previous experience: “Organised collection for Calais Refugees (and youth based charity in Swaziland) through cake sells and organising discos for younger school years; bucket collections for Marie Curie” “charity shop volunteer; litter picker; fundraising for Children in Need; a cuddle programme in a premature baby unit; helping the elderly with their computers/using the internet; helping refugees to develop English language skills as a student-run initiative” (14 mentions from this list) “National Citizen Service programme” (3 mentions) “helped to communicate the severity of local homelessness, encouraging local people to provide necessities such as food and water to those sleeping rough” (2 mentions) “European Youth Parliament organiser; Advocacy NE Training” (1 mention)</p> <p>Motivations: “(hoping to) actually interact with people” “to give back” “to hopefully make an impact and explore possible career in the voluntary sector” (4 mentions) “particularly interested in poverty and education” “to help the community and build upon my communication and people skills” “to work in the humanitarian field, either in education or response to crisis” “to make a difference to other people’s lives” (5 mentions) “I want to step out of my comfort zone” “Tyne and Wear Citizens sounds like a brilliant new approach to politics and a way for people to bring about change in the North East” “Tyne and Wear Citizens because of what I have read about the #JustChange campaign regarding free school meals, and on hate crime, and mental health (3 mentions, heard about community organising from earlier cohort).</p>	
2018/19	Selected phrases from free-text survey responses	n = cohort of 15
	<p>Previous experience: “three weeks in Ghana constructing new library and improving existing facilities . . . had to organise multiple fundraising events for travel costs” “volunteered in Africa for a week at a school teaching English” “volunteered as part of my Duke of Edinburgh award” “regularly helped at local primary school to help with reading” (3 mentions) “children’s camp counsellor” “litter picker at (music) festival” (2 mentions) “students union RAG (raising and giving)</p> <p>Motivations: “I want to help make a positive difference for the organisations I will be involved with” “Hoping to step away from the University bubble and work with local people (and) help to improve their opinion of students” “I want something to add to my cv and to build me as a person” (2 mentions) “I’d like more knowledge of how the charity sector actually operates and to make a difference within the local community” “I am very interested in sustainability and the environment, and grassroots community engagement is a great way to achieve these goals” (direct reference to community organising for change).</p>	
2017/18	Selected phrases from free-text survey responses	n = cohort of 21
	<p>Previous experience: “volunteering in Madagscar on conservation projects with Operation Wallacea” (2 mentions) “helped with Rotary Club fundraising around my village (linked with overseas expedition” “Volunteering this summer in Nicaragua for 10 weeks on a sanitation project with the charity Raleigh International” “a week of volunteering in school for disabled children in Brunei” “took part in conservation work for NGO project in Mexico” “Worked with a team to raise money to build/redecorate an orphanage in Rishikesh, India” “donated clothes, stationary, books etc.” (3 mentions like this) “Volunteered in a local hospice charity shop as part of my Duke of Edinburgh award” (2 mentions) “with National Citizen Service” (3 mentions) “volunteered at festivals for Oxfam and as an English language teacher with refugee student society” “I volunteered for a food bank/primary school in my local town during the school holidays” (3 mentions) Motivations: “thinking of working for a charity in the future” (2 mentions) “motivated by my family experience of caring for older relatives” “I’ve been involved with volunteering my whole life because my mum runs the hometown branch of (a national charity)” “interested in austerity issues” “homelessness is a real issue I care about” “passionate about sustainability, the ethos behind (food waste education) is really inspiring and one that needs to be spread” (2 mentions) “I have done little volunteering before, which is why I was really keen to do this module” “I am not aware of all the partner organisations but I’m happy for a new challenge” “I really want to make a difference” “I am excited to be in a more practical module”</p>	

potential for growing activism on the curriculum. Looking at the range of experience and expectations across four cohorts, it is apparent that interest in community organising has increased incrementally over time as a function of graduating students sharing their enthusiasm with those who follow them.

The 2017/18 cohort typically cite the cultural capital benefits of volunteering activities on a gap year or in school. Examples of this include activities “in Madagascar on a conservation project” “redecorating an orphanage in Rishikesh, India” “as an English language teacher with refugee student society” “with National Citizen Service” and “in a local hospice charity shop as part of my Duke of Edinburgh Award”. Motivations and expectations are typically couched in the language of “helping” (serving), something “to give back” around issues of “sustainability”, “homelessness” and “food waste,” also with an eye on career development “thinking of future career in voluntary sector” and “to add something to my cv and build me as a person” (Box A 2017/18 student responses).

By 2019/20 several students have heard about the partnership with Tyne and Wear Citizens and some cite campaigns such as #Justchange and Safer Cities that they “would love to get involved with”. By 2020/21 there is more consistent reference to direct engagement with activist causes (Extinction Rebellion) and methods “civic and digital activism”, “to organise for change”, linking intentions and feelings – being “passionate” to collective power “to make a difference beyond the university”.

Stirring emotions: from anger and agitation to action

We live in an “age of anger” (Mishra, 2017) and this is evident in the widespread use of emotional language and personal experience in student journeys (in Box A and in class discussion). While Davies (2020, p. 169) observes that “anger has long been recognised as a powerful driver of political action and resistance, by feminist scholars among others” historically, philosophers have held anger in low esteem. It is controversial and contested to advocate emotional stirring in a higher educational context due to the perception that it risks poor mental health. Martha Nussbaum (2016) argues that even when anger rightfully identifies a harm or unjust act, its utility is reduced to a desire for retribution. By contrast, Karen Adkins (2020, p. 195) observes that anger should be understood as a dignity-claim that enables individuals or groups to assert an identity that is persistently ignored or disregarded. Anger is an assertion of political presence, demanding a “bigger table” (as opposed to voting for a seat in political musical chairs) as demonstrated at US Women’s Marches in 2017 (Adkins, 2020, p. 199).

Typical in the testimonies shared in this case study is the instinct of organisers to harness their anger at witnessing injustices, oppression, and a flawed world. According to Cortes, “anger has to be controlled and connected to a concern for someone; there has to be a restraint to the action connected with anger.” This distinguishes “hot” from “cold” anger, emphasising not only non-violence but the need to prevent activist “burn-out”. Unlike hot-tempered or violent rage, “cold anger” can be nurtured and sustained. This is like the two “ideal types” of anger defined by Davies (2020, p. 169): fast anger – that arises in an automatic, pre-conscious, reactive and performative way that can spiral into violence; slow anger – that builds up over time in response to perceived injustice, potentially generating anxious melancholia. Community organising methods and leadership training involve listening to and sharing stories of lived experience. Identifying the source of

people's anger makes it possible "to draw on these testimonies as fuel for the energy people need to confront those who hold power over their lives" (Rogers, 1990, p. 191).

Core to the critical pedagogy framing this study is belief that we can *turn anger into action* (Bolton, 2017). Students in **Box B** reflect on this as a source of purpose and hope. Recognising the transformative potential of emotional stirring runs counter to the concern usually expressed in higher education pedagogy at the emotional toll of an already struggling student cohort. For example, Klocker et al. (2021, p. 2) consider how university teaching methods might better support student wellbeing and mental health by advocating trigger warnings and managing difficult emotions to minimize harm. They

Box B. composite vignette of student experience and reflections on the 'political theatre' of a large Tyne and Wear Citizens (TAWC) Assembly and associated direct action (2018-2022).

One of my first experiences of community organising with TAWC was through the Assembly: "Initially, I found it difficult and confusing to understand how TAWC operated, as I had never heard of community organising before. The first meeting I attended I was not confident enough to share my opinions or put myself forward to take on roles." We participated in the Assembly as members of the floor team, supporting key roles such as co-chairs, timekeeper, action team speakers, chaperones for the VIP guests, and technical support. **We learned from seminal texts by Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire that campaigning is most likely to get results if the Assembly is staged as a piece of political theatre. But we were not here to "watch a show." It was explained that: "This Assembly is about all of us. Everyone in this room has a part to play. We are not a collection of random individuals.** Tyne & Wear Citizens is a charity and a non-partisan organisation. All of us come from an organisation that cares about this region." This was said to seek consent and to demonstrate democracy from the floor. First impressions were of a thousand-seat venue packed with a diverse gathering – in stark contrast to passive and partisan public consultations. **The script was emotionally stirring as it combined moments of tension with scope for celebration.** "It struck me that children and young people who are otherwise overlooked and ignored in decision-making have a visible platform here" (Student personal communication 2020).

The timekeeper role is important because "by keeping the event and all speakers to time, without fear or favour, we respect our speakers and the decision makers who we are seeking to build working relationships with". "We've kept on developing leaders, strengthening our institutions, increasing the number of people involved in public life, and working together to create change. This is what brings us all here this evening." (Assembly script.) Unlike an election hustling, **the Assembly was scripted in three parts**, without questions or heckling from the floor. The first part explained the origins of TAWC in a regional history of collective action for justice. This concluded in a roll call of member organisations to demonstrate the strength of mandate. We then heard powerful testimonies on priority issues and campaigns for action. Storytelling is at the heart of community organising through one-to-one meetings where we listen to and share our story:

"Through community organising I have been told and trusted with honest and personal stories of deplorable Islamophobic hate crime, student struggles with poor mental health and experiences of child poverty. **TAWC has provided me with a platform to tell my own stories, while giving me the tools to realise my own power to progress social change with the backing of the collective alliance**" (Student reflection 2018/19).

"As a community organising volunteer, I worked with a group of children in a local school in Sunderland on the launch of Just Change and to help support schools to de-stigmatise access to school meals" (student reflection 2019/20).

"From the beginning of my journey I was made aware that focussing on the Just Change and Schools-Based Counselling Campaigns would benefit both the campaign groups through my passion for young people and help to develop my own future ambitions in education. **I could explain why I am so passionate about working with young people by looking back at the struggles my own peers went through in school.** I was encouraged to act on my own self-interests (anger and motivations for change) and not to pursue a campaign that I was less passionate about" (Student reflections, 2019/20).

Within the Just Change team (we) conducted a power analysis to identify key "power holders" such as MPs and private organisations. Initially I struggled to understand the concept of power analysis in the training I was following, one evening each week. There were a lot of unfamiliar concepts. **But when I applied the training to our meeting with my MP to gain her support for the campaign, I discovered that community organising is about "speaking truth to power".** My MP was clearly interested in hearing from us, as she needed to understand her constituents. She agreed to apply for a ministerial debate in support of our campaign, demonstrating that change is possible" (Student reflections 2020/21).

Positive commitments were asked of each authority figure. A typical "ask" on mental health: "if elected will you ensure that, by the end of your five-year term, every school under North of Tyne Combined Authority responsibility, be it Local Authority maintained or Academy, has access to counselling provision?" Positive agreement elicited rousing applause and celebration. Even when pushing an uncomfortable reversal of platform, candidates for public office were treated with courtesy and thanked with a gift. **The final part is always celebratory, demonstrating how "working together for the betterment of our communities, together, action is the oxygen of democracy."** (Assembly script.)

concede that their students “expected to feel distress as part-and-parcel of their chosen area of study and found being confronted a productive experience” (Klocker et al., 2021, p. 2). Yet the authors stop short of promoting direct action.

I argue that community organising offers mental health benefits as hope is gained from “ordinary activism” (Brown & Pickerill, 2009). One student participating in training with TAWC expresses this well:

“What is the point of the university teaching us about all this damage and despair, poverty, and austerity, if they don’t want or encourage us to do something about it?” “You make us feel angry and motivated to act – but you leave us to write an essay about the issues instead of mobilising.” “You teach us all this content that is upsetting and makes us angry, without showing us what to do with this anger”. (pers. comm. TAWC Training Workshop 2019)

It is common for students to cite improved self-esteem and confidence when they reflect on engaged learning:

”I now have confidence going into the outside world knowing I can be a part of something bigger” (student 2019/20)

“this (direct action) increased my mental wellbeing during the second national lockdown because it gave me a sense of purpose and hope”. (student 2020/21)

”following the training and one-to-one meetings I felt more connected”.

“I’ve learned an enormous amount about myself, the way I work, and values that are important to me”.

”We were constantly being encouraged to challenge ourselves (and I am now) a lot more courageous, knowing I can be part of something bigger.” (Student observation(s) 2020/21).

These claims of perspective awareness resonate with what journalist Sonia Sodha (2020) says about the choice she makes to write (and act) as antidote to sitting with anger as a “paralysing emotion”: righteous anger has its place – it can be cathartic and healing – but it’s not enough to change the world. The point is not whether we are angry or anxious, because these emotions are universal to the human condition, but how we turn these emotions into something more positive for ourselves and our communities.

Feeling part of something bigger: the ‘political theatre’ of organising for change

Training in community organising requires students and staff to participate in at least one large civic gathering of member organisations. Tyne and Wear Citizens held six Assemblies between December 2015 and March 2022 (one pivoting online and one adapted to hybrid format). A typical 18–24-month cycle of organising entails (i) issues workshops (research and Listening Campaign); (ii) Delegates Assembly (prioritising issues for organised action); (iii) Action campaigns (with tactical timing); (iv) Accountability Assembly (for candidates of Local, General, and Mayoral Elections when possible). This rolling calendar also features Living Wage Foundation celebrations (November) and efforts to deepen democracy through voter registration, and routine evaluations: Did action provoke reaction? Who was in the room? Did turnout demonstrate power? Who stood out for their leadership?

Students on the module participate in all or some of this cycle of “research-action-evaluation” subject to their inevitably peripatetic lifestyle and a timetable (October to March with long Christmas break) that poorly aligns with the non-academic sphere. They must therefore navigate a “non-linear” experience of “learning by doing”.

When the 2017/18 cohort began organising, Tyne and Wear Citizens had already completed a comprehensive Listening Campaign (1,900 conversations across all subscribing organisations with people from all backgrounds, ages, and faith groups in the region, exploring what is putting pressure on local communities). Listening concluded in September 2017 with a Delegates Assembly voting to focus on three priorities: improving mental health, working for safer communities and to tackle poverty.

Despite joining mid-cycle, this cohort gained first-hand experience of a major Assembly (November 2017), they helped to organise the AGM (December 2017), and they each joined one or more action team(s). The mental health action team gathered testimonies for a campaign on school-based counselling. Local action to reduce poverty developed around persuading regional employers to pay the Living Wage (targeting universities and local authorities), advancing Fair Work, and efforts to reclaim Just Change from free school meals. The Safer Cities Action Team (SCAT) developed effective dialogue with influential civic leaders and policymakers to implement and review hate crime policies in public and private establishments.

Students joined SCAT in two high profile campaigns in 2018. On 3 April 2018 hundreds of people formed a human chain around Newcastle Central Mosque for #LoveAMuslimDay; this was in response to hate-crime letters that were sent to addresses across the UK calling for acts of violence against Muslims (so-called “Punish a Muslim Day”). The ‘habits of action’ were such that students continued to organise beyond the end of the module. Students from the study joined hundreds of TAWC members to “Reclaim the Metro” in October 2018 (Bryson & Todd, 2021, p. 243). This action drew attention to the rise of Islamophobia after Brexit and attacks on Muslim women, identified for their hijab. As a result of the public action to “Reclaim the Metro”, Tyne and Wear Citizens won a Hate Crime Charter on public transport. The charter made commitments to train transport staff and to build confidence amongst communities to challenge and report hate crime.

Student participants were initially intimidated by witnessing a partial and disjointed cycle of community organising that is longer and slower than the window of opportunity allowed by the academic calendar. Student observations in **Box B** reveal the extent to which community organising appears “difficult and confusing to understand” when compared with classroom teaching. Initial “discomfort” coincided with a period of “unlearning” habits and expectations of hierarchical and prescriptive learning. At the same time, students gained new “habits of action” as they engaged in one-to-one relationships of trust to develop as leaders:

(this provided) a platform to tell my own stories, while giving me the tools to realise my own power to progress social change with the backing of the collective alliance. We learned that campaigning is most likely to get results if staged as a piece of political theatre. But we were not here to “watch a show”. It was explained that: this Assembly is about all of us. Everyone in this room has a part to play. We are not a collection of random individuals The script was emotionally stirring as it combined moments of tension with scope for celebration

(Highlighted quotes from **Box B** composite vignette).

In short, initial hesitancy is mitigated by feelings of belonging to a broad-based community of practice. This non-linear learning needs time (not to be squeezed into a single term) and extensive pastoral support. The vignette in **Box B** further sheds light on the way that cold or slow anger is harnessed in a carefully scripted “theatrical” framework. Student organisers benefit from “feeling part of something bigger” and a “theatricality” that turns anger into hope, reducing the risk of melancholy.

The transitory status of student activism: (un)learning habits and expectations

The above cited Newcastle University “graduate skills framework” is fairly typical in promoting the acquisition of leadership skills “to motivate and co-ordinate group members, and to take responsibility for decisions and results.” Due to concise and instrumental framing, these listed qualities do not account directly for the feelings of team-mates. By contrast, the case study findings are important in showing that students “unlearn” instrumental ideas and habits by engaging instead with the fundamentals of non-violent communication (Koopman & Seliga, 2021). This is significant to the “maintenance” work of group wellbeing alongside defined team roles and tasks (Ochre, 2013). Acknowledging fears of the unknown, and of change, while turning that fear into empathy is challenging for students in the rigid institutional arrangements of the neoliberal university context. A delicate balance must be struck between challenging instrumental teaching and assessment and retaining academic rigours and credit from alternative models of learning. I assert from the case study findings that student leaders learn to reflect on human relationships and feelings when they actively participate in community organising on the geography curriculum. The “habits of action” help them to develop an inner authority and self-awareness by reflecting on the passion and purpose that motivates and transforms them as change-makers. As Buckingham and Goodall (2019, p. 234) observe, graduate skills such as social responsibility and leadership are not abstract or fixed characteristics but are instead rooted in human interactions. Their currency is relational. This resonates with what has been written elsewhere about yearning to belong (at university) as feeling part of something bigger than us, replacing individualistic “me” with “we-thinking” (Christens, 2010; Jarvis, 2019).

Long before the pandemic, students on the case study module frequently referred to feeling trapped “in a bubble” that was paradoxically comfortable but stifling. This detached sense of belonging was most extreme for students who moved away from home into student accommodation. They wanted to explore the community outside this bubble, and this module offered a way to do this. Non-traditional students and those who were commuting from off-campus homes, jobs and friendship groups often struggled to inhabit the real-time and place-based realities of community organising.

The transitory status of student life is explored in group dialogue (1.a, 1.d, 1.e) to reveal inter-personal resources and gathering resolve that are usually suppressed in academic research and writing (Pitimson, 2019). As one student wrote in their reflective log, “I was excited about being involved in local community action as I’ve lived here for the past two years, and I feel like I’ve been trapped in a student bubble. These feelings reflect the larger impact of studentification as I live, work, and socialise (within) a largely student residential area” (Student observations, 2018/19).

In **Box A** it was observed that traditional volunteering activities (fundraising, campaigning, donating time and effort) tend to reinforce charitable (and individual) rather than transformational (and collective) skills and relationships. In **Box B**, transformational, emotionally stirring features of community organising are shown to develop students as activist citizens. Yet the case study university continues to publicise student charity work over activism. The suggestion is that service is favoured over organising for change because the skills involved conform to conventional notions of employment readiness.

The dominant image of volunteering that most students enter university with is cast in the formative years of primary and secondary education, and by modelling the values and behaviour of family members. If passive expectations go unchallenged, opportunities for activist alternatives are suppressed (Green et al., 2021). Only by developing a critical approach to service, advocacy, and organising for change is it possible to “unlearn” damaging effects of individualism, entitlement, and unconscious bias. This might be why non-traditional students appear to flourish in the approach to university community organising explored in this paper. The head teacher of a participating school in the alliance claims that children who are going to have to fight for future life-chances gain more from learning how to organise in their community than they do from giving or receiving charity. This arose in **Box B** when student organisers worked with primary school children to win change on issues of holiday hunger, improving their school environment, and on road safety. The suggestion is that initiatives to widen access and participation in university admissions might usefully engage local schools in a pipeline of activist community engaged learning (Asfa, 2022).

Concluding remarks

University commitment to civic engagement and external partnerships have been criticised for being too often rooted in neoliberal metrics of charity rather than justice (Morton et al., 2012). Charity occurs when resources and surplus are given from one entity to another. Justice is demonstrated where universities and partners benefit mutually from pursuing common goals, and by redistributing or fairly sharing resources. In the context of community engaged learning, this paper draws attention to moral obligations of universities to social justice, deepening democracy, and relational concerns that shape student experience and wellbeing (Kallio et al., 2015, p. 102). This refocusing coincides with evidence that students expect their education to have social purpose and to equip them to confront the anxieties of a precarious future. The students in this case study are not unusual in their desire to make a positive difference.

The empirical analysis has shed light on at least three ways that “organising for change” benefits students, universities, and a broad alliance of civic partners. Firstly, partnerships such as Citizen UK help to redistribute university assets, including student learning, to address power asymmetries. Secondly, community organising methods and training advance social, emotional, and ethical competence (Cohen, 2006, p. 201). This guides students to make sense of, and to articulate, their anger at a time of deeply unsettling, even life-threatening new realities (Boyer, 2022; Klocker et al., 2021). Thirdly, community organising training and methods can play a unique role in educating issues of equality, diversity,

and Inclusion (EDI) within the higher education sector. In contrast with discrete EDI targets, such as unconscious bias training, when students and staff participate in community organising, they gain perspective and reflect on anti-oppressive language and tools (such as active bystander empathy and self-care, accessible and diverse learning styles).

As often as we hear the well-worn business-case that young people need a degree to improve chances of better paid graduate employment, it is widely observed that “a degree is not enough”. Like Grant (2021), the findings above have shown how graduates of community organising on the curriculum gain “world readiness” as well-rounded “change makers” beyond narrowly instrumental “employability”. For example:

Engaging in this campaign and my increasing passion around issues of in-work poverty and employee treatment are influential in encouraging me to explore a trade union job role as a possible future position. (Student reflection, 2018/19)

This focus on my passions and self-interest encouraged me to apply for Teach First. I felt empowered by the Citizens approach, allowing children to give testimonies and voice their concerns . . . and I want to develop this method of giving children a voice in the classroom, especially with their concerns after the pandemic, to ensure the needs of the students in my care are listened to and positive change is created. (Student reflection, 2020/21)

The phrase “world ready” is preferable to “job ready” because it emphasises collectively negotiated skills of social responsibility and civility. As Grant (2021, p. 41) observes, confronted with an uncertain job market and multiple socio-economic and ecological crises, a socially responsible education is one that develops critical “values-led” soft skills, over and above subject-specific knowledge.

The findings have drawn critical attention toward the transformative potential of place-based community organising as a theory and practice of social change. I call for further investment and risk-taking to increase equitable and meaningful student participation in new models of engaged learning. Attention has been drawn to the non-linear and “messy” characteristics of learning-by-doing that collide with instrumental and centralised student services, notably timetables, and degree programme specifications, specifically standardised assessment tariffs. With grading systems that are currently skewed to narrow definitions of “success” it is difficult to make space for disappointment when plans go awry, or for outcomes based on personal development and core values. Rigid institutional arrangements should not be allowed to inhibit efforts to bring activism into the geography curriculum.

Notes

1. CO occupies an ambiguous position with respect to conventional politics. As a charity, CUK must be non-partisan. In the run up to the 2010 general election and through the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government that followed, David Cameron announced plans to build the Big Society along the lines of community organizing. Most elements of the voluntary and community came to regard the Big Society as a brand of localism that became increasingly toxic (Bunyan, 2013). The misappropriation of CO training and methods at this time led to suspicion and

misunderstanding within the voluntary and community sector, especially among proponents of Community Development (see Taylor, 2011).

2. A comprehensive account of recent trends in university and student finance is beyond the scope of this paper. From 2023, most new starters in the English student finance system will pay for their degree and living costs through a combination of loans/graduate tax. The terms of repayment are as significant as the estimated £50,000 debt that most students graduate with. The vast majority of those who go to university will pay the equivalent of 9% extra tax above a threshold, for up to 40 years to pay for their education – many of them never fully repaying the principal sum (<https://www.moneysavingexpert.com/students/student-loans-2023/>).

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