

Duke Service-Learning

Critical Service-Learning Conversations Tool

A self-assessment and resource tool to help faculty implement critical, justice-oriented service-learning



Michaela Stith, Dane Emmerling, David Malone. Images by Briani Meyers.

5-18-2018

Introduction

“Critical service-learning” is a growing ideology distinguished from traditional service-learning. Scholars criticize that traditional service-learning may entrench social inequity by prioritizing students over communities and ignoring the political nature of service (Kahne et al. 1994, Eby 1998). Meanwhile, critical service-learning endeavors to explicitly integrate social justice concepts in the classroom; redistribute power among students, professors, and community partners; and develop authentic relationships (Mitchell 2008).

Service-learning literature endorses “critical” frameworks, but faculty often lack the support necessary to implement pedagogy and programming that are aligned with these principles. No existing tool assesses professors’ implementation of critical service-learning.

Duke Service-Learning has created a guided conversational tool for faculty seeking to implement critical service-learning concepts in their courses. We developed the tool by reviewing critical service-learning literature and organizing important concepts into themes. The tool presents illustrative scenarios and action-oriented statement grouped into five themes: Understanding Systems, Authentic Relationships, Redistribution of Power, Equitable Classrooms, and Social Change Skills.

Survey questions and themes in this Conversational Tool are deeply rooted in the current service-learning literature. We would like to thank all the authors referenced in “Resources” sections for their contributions to the Tool’s development. In addition, special thanks are due to Dr. Tania Mitchell for her leadership in the critical service-learning field. Four of our five themes are directly related to her critical service-learning model’s three components: Social Change Orientation, Working to Redistribute Power, and Developing Authentic Relationships.

Instructions

The purpose of this survey is to help faculty reflect on the extent to which they incorporate critical theory and social justice practices in their service-learning courses. Although you can navigate the survey on your own, it may be more interesting in pairs. Each partner can take turns reading statements to the other partner and recording their responses.

Components

The survey is arranged in five themes. An illustrated scenario at the beginning of each theme describes potential challenges in traditional service-learning courses and sets up the theme as a critical solution. On the backside of each scenario is a list of statements. The statements are arranged in sub-sections and labelled according to the Area of Learning to which they pertain: Reflection, Pedagogy, Academic Content, and Community Praxis. The statements are arranged such that greater agreement (e.g. “agree,” “strongly agree”) indicates stronger implementation of critical service-learning praxis, while disagreement indicates need for further action. After the statements, we provide relevant resources to help faculty explore the theme further.

Instructions

- 1) Imagine yourself in each scenario. Rank the degree to which you currently implement each theme in your own courses.
- 2) Based on your rankings, choose the two themes which you are currently implementing *least*.
- 3) Read each statement for the two themes which you currently implement least. Indicate how much you agree with each statement in the appropriate bubbles.
- 4) Complete the “Closing Activity” to reflect upon and interpret your results.

Understanding Systems

One of your students left this commentary in the end-of-semester course evaluations: “I loved this course! I learned so much about the host community. I worked at the soup kitchen for ten hours this semester and met a lot of Durham’s homeless people. Many of them are just like me, except they've made bad choices that landed them in jail or lack the social skills to secure jobs long term. Overall, I think this course helped me grow compassion for homeless people. From now on I will be much more likely to say hi or give a dollar to homeless people I see on the street. I hope that a course like this is offered when my future children attend college! They would benefit greatly, as I have, from meeting people unlike them and learning the importance of giving back.”

This scenario problematizes the reality that students sometimes leave service-learning courses with shallow understandings of how social problems originate and are perpetuated. Understanding Systems is an ability to analyze and understand the root causes of social problems and the symptoms of the social problems in communities. Faculty can contextualize the impact of service-learning and ground the social problems historically to expose the scope of the social problem in class. Moreover, the faculty can foster students’ sustained engagement with social issues.

To what extent does your service-learning course currently implement Understanding Systems? Fill in the appropriate bubble.

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A good deal	A great deal
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Understanding Systems

Area of Learning	Contextualizing Service-Learning	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Reflection	Reflection activities prompt students to examine whether/how their service work addresses root causes of social problems.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pedagogy	You help students recognize how service may perpetuate and exacerbate social challenges, rather than cure them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pedagogy	The course contextualizes the impact of service activities within the magnitude and scope of the social issue being investigated.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Area of Learning	Historical Grounding	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Academic Content	The course analyzes the historical roots of social issues.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Academic Content	The course connects the historical roots of social issues to the present.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Area of Learning	Understanding Social Systems	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pedagogy	The course discusses how knowledge, service, and our framing of social problems are inherently political.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reflection	Reflection activities ask students to understand the connection between their service experiences and civic life, public policy, and social systems.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reflection	Reflection activities encourage students to examine their preconceptions about social problems, community, or citizenship with which they entered the course.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further Resources
Tania D. Mitchell (2008). Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models. <i>Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning</i> , 14, 50-65.
Lucia Buttaró (2009). Social Justice and Democracy in Marginalized Urban Settings. <i>Scholarlypartnershipsdu</i> , 4(1), 48-76.
Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer (1994). In the Service of What? The Politics of Service Learning. <i>Phi Delta Kappan</i> , 77(9), 1-14.

Authentic Relationships

At the start of each semester you ask your service-learning students to select their placement sites from a predetermined list. You ask the community partners to complete student evaluations and ask the students to complete partner evaluations after you submit grades at the end of each semester.

One of the community partners gave a very poor review this semester: the student rarely came to scheduled service events, was disengaged and uninterested when she did attend, and was generally unhelpful to the partner. Yet the student also left a negative review, indicating that problems with course structure had contributed to her disengagement. She expressed that her service work seemed unrelated to classroom assignments and therefore unimportant to her grade. In addition, she felt that her community placement was irrelevant to her personal interests and professional goals. How might you have shown the student that service work aligned with coursework? What methods could you have used to diagnose and solve these problems earlier in the semester?

This scenario points to a lack of Authentic Relationships between students, faculty, and community partners. An Authentic Relationship benefits both university and community by ensuring that both of their needs are met. In addition, the university and community partner must seek to understand each other's specific history, culture, and positionality. Authentic Relationships are supported when students gain a holistic understanding of the community, when faculty maintain relationships beyond one semester, and when the university demonstrates commitment to the partner.



To what extent does your service-learning course currently implement Authentic Relationships? Fill in the appropriate bubble.

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A good deal	A great deal
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Authentic Relationships

Area of Learning	Students' Holistic Understanding of the Community	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Academic Content	The course provides a thorough orientation of the community, including its historical and political relationships with your university.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Praxis	You offer students opportunities to engage with the partner community outside of the service experience.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pedagogy	You help students recognize evidence of socially unjust systems in the host community without erasing the individuality of community members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Area of Learning	Commitment to partner	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Community Praxis	The service-learning experience has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet expectations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Praxis	The service compromises between the partner's schedule and academic calendar.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

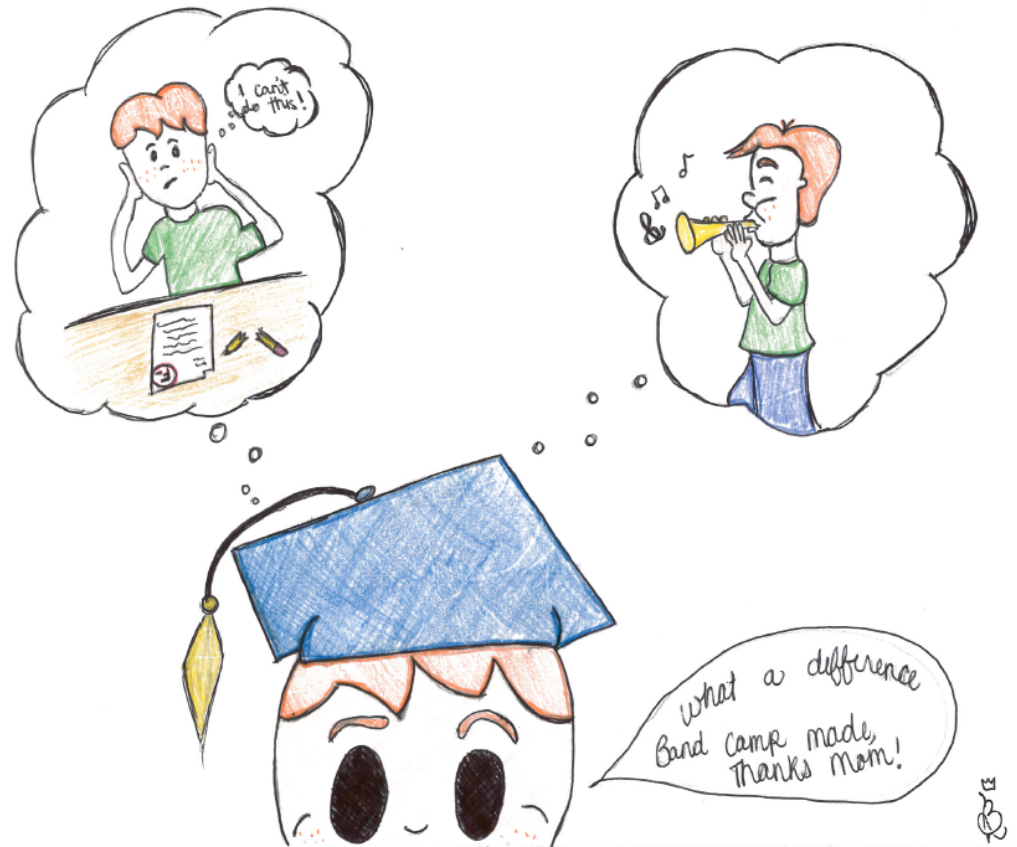
Area of Learning	Maintaining Relationships	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Community Praxis	You regularly visit the service site to serve or learn about the site.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Praxis	You utilize formal structures (e.g. memorandum of understanding) to outline shared expectations and responsibilities with the partner.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Praxis	You regularly communicate with community partners about the quality and impact of students' ongoing work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Praxis	You attempt to match students' skills and interests with those of their community partner.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reflection	Reflection activities allow students to report their experiences with the community partner.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further Resources
Smith, G. & Sobel, D. (2010). <i>Place-and Community-Based Education in Schools</i> . New York: Routledge.
Marie Sandy and Barbara A. Holland (2006). Different Worlds and Common Ground: Community Partner Perspectives on Campus-Community Partnerships. <i>Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning</i> , 13, 30-44.
Tania D. Mitchell (2008). Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models. <i>Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning</i> , 14, 50-65.

Redistribution of Power

To prepare your students to enter service placements, you ask students to prepare presentations on a social problem they want to tackle in the host community. You design this assignment independently, without input from community partners. One pair of students chooses to present on standardized test scores. They compare the test scores of “at risk” students in Durham to their own test scores in high school. They say that, compared to their peers in high school, these students earn lower average test scores, have higher rates of juvenile delinquency and spend less time participating in extracurricular activities. They found this information online and did not collaborate with community members during the research stage. Since students who play musical instruments have higher test scores than those who don't, your students propose an after-school program in which they teach music lessons. They developed this idea without seeking input from the community. Additionally, you did not invite community partners to the presentation.

This scenario demonstrates that power differentials between the host community and university can foster negative consequences, such as a shallow understanding of social problems. When redistributing power, faculty can educate students about the power dynamics of service-learning that implicate students as assets and host communities as those in need. Moreover, faculty can reorient their definitions of “need” and emphasize communities’ strengths in order to disrupt those views of university as asset and community as deficit. Finally, community members can serve as co-teachers with relevant, legitimate knowledge.



To what extent does your service-learning course currently implement Redistribution of Power? Fill in the appropriate bubble.

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A good deal	A great deal
○	○	○	○	○

Redistribution of Power

Area of Learning	Contextualizing Power Dynamics	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Reflection	Reflection activities ask students to understand the ethical challenges that arise during the service experience.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Academic Content	Assigned readings problematize power dynamics in service-learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Area of Learning	Reorienting “Need”	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pedagogy	The community partner (more so than you or the students) defines the needs of the organization and community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pedagogy	You frame community disparities in terms of structural injustices rather than individual deficits.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Area of Learning	Recognizing Community Strengths	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Academic Content	You train students in approaches that recognize community resources and knowledge (e.g. community asset mapping, motivational interviewing, or appreciative inquiry).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reflection	Reflection activities encourage students to recognize the strengths of the community in which they work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Praxis	Service builds on existing community strengths and social capital.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Area of Learning	Sharing the Classroom	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Community Praxis	You work with community partners to establish a shared vision and mutually agreed-upon student learning objectives for the course.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Praxis	Community partners have input on students’ participation grades.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further Resources
Arnstein, Sherry R. (1969). A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. <i>Journal of the American Planning Association</i> , 35(4), 216-224.
Eby, John W (1998). “Why Service Learning is Bad.” <i>Service Learning, General</i> , 3, 1-10.
John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann (1993). <i>Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing A Community’s Assets</i> . Evanston, Illinois: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University.

Equitable Classrooms

You teach a service-learning course about cross-cultural research. Students learn field-accepted techniques to overcome physical and conceptual boundaries between communities, then practice the techniques by working with service partners. You assume that your students have not entered low-income, primarily-Black or -Latinx communities before this course. Additionally, the literature you assign is overwhelmingly peer-reviewed and only accessible from scholarly databases. During office hours one of your students of color confides that she does not feel she is learning in class. She does not agree with many of the assigned authors' personifications of people of color. Moreover, she does not identify with the role the authors expect she should take because their descriptions of students center whiteness and historical privilege.

This scenario speaks to the importance of Equitable Classrooms. The Western classroom was born in a historical context that typically excluded women, low-wealth students and racial minorities. Many of the means by which higher education is taught and organized can continue these patterns of exclusion. To create a critical service-learning course, faculty can bring marginalized voices to the center of the classroom by assigning readings from underrepresented authors and promoting non-traditional knowledge sources such as the experiences of community members. Also, faculty can create a classroom atmosphere in which students can engage with diverse perspectives to come to new understandings.

To what extent does your service-learning course currently implement Equitable Classrooms? Fill in the appropriate bubble.

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A good deal	A great deal
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Equitable Classrooms

Area of Learning	Nontraditional Knowledge Sources	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Academic Content	The course problematizes the ways in which “legitimized” knowledge is researched, defined, framed and presented.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pedagogy	Members of the community are brought into the classroom as co-educators and important knowledge sources.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Academic Content	You assign non-traditional materials (non-peer-reviewed literature, multimedia, etc.) to complement traditional academic resources.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Academic Content	You regularly reevaluate the ethnic, racial, sexual and gender backgrounds of the authors whose readings you assign.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Area of Learning	Engaging Diversity and Identity	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Reflection	You establish ground rules/expectations during reflection that enable all students—not only those typically privileged by the Western classroom—to voluntarily, comfortably share their experiences.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reflection	You provide counterevidence to students who express racist, colonialist, misogynistic or problematic views during reflection.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pedagogy	You educate yourself on the perspectives of marginalized groups on the topic you teach.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reflection	You regularly discuss the effect of students’ race, ethnicity, religion and other cultural biases on their service experiences.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reflection	You sustain, rather than isolate, conversations about race, class and privilege over the course of a semester.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pedagogy	You reevaluate your curriculum based on the changing composition of your students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further Resources
Elisabeth Hayes and Sondra Cuban (1996). <i>Border Pedagogy: A Critical Framework for Service Learning</i> . American Educational Research Association Conference, New York, NY.
Renee Carter-Chapman and Marilyn Barry (2008). <i>Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education</i> . Retrieved from http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org/handbook .
Robin DiAngelo and Ozlem Sensoy (2014). Leaning In: A Student’s Guide to Engaging Constructively with Social Justice Content. <i>Radical Pedagogy</i> , n.p.
Tania D. Mitchell, David M. Donahue & Courtney Young-Law (2012). Service Learning as a Pedagogy of Whiteness. <i>Equity & Excellence in Education</i> , 45(4), 612-629.

Social Change Skills

One of your students volunteers at their community placement three times per week and has received outstanding feedback. However, the student is despondent during class reflection. She feels that she contributes a lot of time volunteering but realizes she will make very little structural change at her service site. In fact, she expresses that her volunteerism may actually exacerbate the social issues being investigated in the course: she feels that her service sustains a systemic deficiency that should not exist in the first place. In her words: "I feel like I'm helping to put a Band-Aid on the problem without creating a solution."

This scenario emphasizes that students often desire Social Change Skills to supplement their critical lens on social problems. In order to help students make social changes, faculty must teach methods of social change to their students, assess the extent to which their service-learning courses alleviate social problems, and build problem-solving capacity in their students to continue to make change once the course is complete. Moreover, service-learning students can collaborate with partners that are making real change in the community.

To what extent does your service-learning course currently implement Social Change Skills? Fill in the appropriate bubble.



Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A good deal	A great deal
○	○	○	○	○

Social Change Skills

Area of Learning	Teaching Social Change Skills	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pedagogy	The course differentiates service-learning from other social change strategies (participatory research, activism, advocacy, direct service, etc.) and explains these alternative methods.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reflection	Reflection activities prompt students to consider current interventions to the social problem and explore alternative solutions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Area of Learning	Assessing Impact	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Community Praxis	Students address the social issues they study in class in their service.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Community Praxis	Service activities prioritize broader, intensive behavior change strategies (i.e., policy changes) over less intensive strategies.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Area of Learning	Capacity-building for Change	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Academic Content	You provide resources (i.e. suggestions of other courses, community and national organizations) so students can pursue a deeper commitment to the social issues being investigated after course completion.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Academic Content	The course couples academic content and service-learning with intentional skill building to improve student self-efficacy for further action.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Further Resources
Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall and Steve Max (2001). <i>Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists</i> . Santa Ana, California: Seven Locks Press.
Tania Mitchell and Kathleen Coll (2017). Ethnic Studies as a Site for Political Education: Critical Service Learning and the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. <i>American Political Science Association</i> , 187-192.
KU Work Group for Community Health and Development (2015). <i>Community Tool Box</i> . Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas. Retrieved from http://ctb.ku.edu/en

Closing Activity

1) Define each of the five themes in your own words:

Understanding Systems	
Authentic Relationships	
Redistribution of Power	
Equitable Classrooms	
Social Change Skills	

2) With the understanding that these may be new concepts for you, rank the five themes from that which you currently implement most to that which you currently implement least in your classroom.

- a. Most implemented: _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____
- e. Least implemented: _____

3) Based on the questions with which you agreed most, what are the strengths in your course?

4) Is there an Area of Learning associated with statements with which you consistently disagreed? Is there an Area of Learning associated with statements with which you consistently agreed?

Closing Activity

- 5) Review the statements with which you agreed least. Use this space to write or draw an illustration of how you might improve your implementation of critical service-learning.