

Teaching transformation: Fostering critical awareness through transformative justice organizing frameworks

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Abstract

The following article explores how the curricular adaptation of seminal and contemporary definitions of and approaches to transformative justice frameworks can foster student's critical reflection from identity awareness toward critical action informed by collectivist perspectives of social change. Applications in the social work curriculum are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Critical social justice education on college campuses is of increasing importance, as campuses become a center of heated debate on social issues and student activism. In recent years, increasing public attention to widening social disparities affecting marginalized communities has spurred student activist engagement. Through various organizing efforts including social media campaigns, demands, and various forms of public demonstrations, students have compelled college administrators to take a moral stance against social policies and actions detrimental to the lives of marginalized groups, respond to hostile campus climates, and institutionalize diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (Griffin et al., 2019; Linder et al., 2019). Among these efforts includes broadening access to student leadership and engagement in social justice education frameworks that promote power-conscious perspectives about society. Diversity and social justice curriculum foster transformative educational outcomes that promote critical thinking, attitudinal change, civic engagement, political participation, and activism (Garvey et al., 2019).

Social work, as a field, is often at the forefront of campus activism with its students leading multi-leveled social change efforts (Pyles & Adam, 2016). Diversity and social justice education is interwoven in the training and development of bachelor and graduate level students as part of students' professionalization. Critically-informed-social work education is rooted in an exploration of issues of power, privilege, diversity, and social justice – with a particular focus on identity-centered critical reflection and self-awareness of one's positionality in practice contexts that includes work with individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. At the same time, the field has been challenged for its complicity in colorblind rhetoric, discourse, and practice, and aiding in multiculturalist paradigms devoid of power-consciousness (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020). Beyond the academy,

transformative justice frameworks are arising as a powerful approach within community organizing efforts. These frameworks offer the opportunities for social work as a field to position classrooms as environments for transformational learning experiences that increase students' critical awareness of social issues and engagement in social action.

The following article explores how the curricular adaptation of seminal and contemporary definitions and approaches of transformative justice frameworks can foster student's critical reflection from identity awareness toward critical action informed by collectivist perspectives of social change. The SALT model presents a framework for social justice leadership that acknowledges the historical, social, and political context of structural inequality as a global problem (see the first article in this issue). Recognizing the systemic context of multi-leveled marginalization and social oppression, Museus et al. (2017) argue that leadership theories that denote socially conscious leadership traits, and moral concepts of change, advance solutions that promote social transformation toward equity and justice. Many progressive, social movement, and abolitionist organizers agree that transformative justice frameworks challenge hegemony and authoritarianism by promoting critical consciousness through critical literacy, de-socialization, and self-education, toward emancipation and liberation of marginalized groups (Jobin-Leeds & AgitArte, 2016; Pyles, 2014; Shor, 1992).

This article describes how a social justice minicourse in social work adapted SALT through critical pedagogical approaches of transformation to move students' critical awareness from individual and interpersonal reflection, toward meaning making of critical action informed by collectivist forms of leadership that explore the process (means) and outcome (ends) of social change. In doing so, this article provides an example of how transformative education teaching methods informed by community organizing perspectives can positively affect student learning experiences and outcomes. Further, this article contributes to research and practice that encourages critical perspectives in diversity and social justice curriculum (Abes et al., 2019).

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE FRAMEWORKS AND TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

Transformative justice in community organizing, and transformative pedagogies in colleges and universities, are distinct yet overlapping frameworks that engage and mobilize individuals, groups, and communities toward anti-racist and anti-oppressive social justice. Transformative justice is embedded in progressive community organizing approaches that advance consciousness-raising, facilitate collective power, and foster meaningful and interdependent relationships within social movements. Many grassroots organizations and social movements apply this approach to build social power toward participatory action, promote relational and equitable leadership models, and create shared visions of socially just futures. Moreover, transformative justice is a framework that extends from education liberation philosophy for social change organizing. Education liberation includes pedagogical methods that foster leadership development through critical literacy, promote individual and community empowerment, and cultivate a shared consciousness of social oppression and marginalization among groups (Freire, 1981; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Pyles 2014; Pyles & Adam, 2016). As a social change framework "it is grounded in the belief that societal change necessarily entails a change in consciousness" (Pyles, 2014, p. 81).

The work of Brazilian educator, philosopher and activist Paulo Freire, and Myles Horton—founder of the Highlander Center, challenged traditional education models by fostering popular education methods that encouraged a social analysis of systemic

oppression, and facilitated individual and group-consciousness through self-examination, reflection, and inquiry. Feminist approaches and reconciliation models have also been attributed to transformative organizing strategies that center marginalized voice through narratives and storytelling and facilitate non-hierarchical leadership in organizing. These approaches are “grounded in the belief that societal change necessarily entails a change in consciousness” (Pyles, 2014, p. 80).

Consciousness-raising strategies are also relevant to social movement organizing efforts that address and repair social harm through community-centered practices of accountability and healing (Pyles, 2014). For example, in recent years anti-violence movements have called for the abolition and reform of criminal-legal institutions that perpetuate the racially discriminatory criminalization and policing of BIPOC communities. Abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba identifies transformative justice in the anti-violence movement as:

a community process developed by anti-violence activists of color, in particular, who wanted to create responses to violence that do what criminal punishment systems fail to do: build support and more safety for the person harmed, figure out how the broader context was set up for this harm to happen, and how that context can be changed so that this harm is less likely to happen again... [This process] requires us to challenge our punitive impulses, while prioritizing healing, repair, and accountability (Kaba, 2021, p. 59).

As such, within anti-violence organizing, a transformative justice approach is deeply relational, contextualizes social harm as a function of structural oppression, and advocates for a collectivist change process wherein marginalized groups are centered, and accountability is enacted by addressing the root cause and symptom of harm. The community process described by Mariame Kaba is also in the work of social movement leader, writer, and activist Adrienne Maree Brown (2017), who developed a transformative organizing framework *emergent strategy* as an adaptive and relational leadership model that incorporates community organizing tools and personal practices that enables “humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions, towards social transformation” (p. 29).

With consciousness-raising at the forefront, transformative justice approaches are and have been evident in community organizing and social movement efforts to build social power and capacity, foster co-liberationist leadership within marginalized contexts, address harm and violence, and promote interpersonal and institutional accountability. Similarly, SALT advocates for socially conscious and transformative leadership in higher education that addresses issues of justice, centers marginalized voices, and advances equitable participation in social action through collectivist norms and practices. Transformative education approaches in diversity and social justice pedagogies facilitate self-inquiry and reflection, as well as practices of self-care, well-being, and mindfulness in group-settings.

Social work and social justice education scholars agree that transformative pedagogical approaches engage students “as critical thinkers, participatory and active learners, and envisioners of alternative possibilities of social reality” (Nagda et al., 2003, p. 167). One important bridge between transformative justice organizing and transformative education pedagogies in social work includes the use of popular education teaching methods. Popular education is a consciousness raising approach to adult learning that facilitates group-consciousness in community participatory action (Freire, 1981; Pyles, 2014; Pyles & Adam, 2016). Examples of popular education methods are evident in transformative education frameworks include elements of intergroup dialogue, peer-to-peer education,

theater, storytelling, and narrative work and other experiential learning approaches that engage the arts to promote transformative learning outcomes (Bell, 2020; Pyles & Adam, 2016).

The social justice education minicourse discussed in this article is situated in pedagogical alignment with many social work and social justice education learning environments that adapt transformative approaches. The course was designed to promote social justice leadership development through concepts, principles, and practices of community change and organizing in social work. By utilizing SALT, the course centered community perspectives of social change through transformative teaching methods, while also centering the wisdom, knowledge, and practice of BIPOC women as co-instructors and facilitators in the classroom. The convergence of transformative justice organizing, and education pedagogy are integral to the curricular modules of the course and inform students' learning experiences.

THE CASC MINOR PROGRAM AND THE HISTORY OF THE DECLARE CURRICULUM

Develop, Engage, Challenge, Learn, Act, Reflect, Empower (DECLARE) is a diversity and social justice education course offered to undergraduate students in the *Community Action and Social Change* (CASC) undergraduate minor at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor. The CASC social justice academic program was founded in 2010 and is housed within the School of Social Work. Since its founding, close to 1000 students have graduated – representing over 50 different majors and enrolled in every school and college at the university. These students engage the minor with an interest in creating change from a variety of perspectives at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. With approximately 40% BIPOC and 25% first generation students, the breadth of difference and diversity has required an intentional emphasis on critical engagement across identity, background, and experience (for more information, see Richards-Schuster et al., 2015).

While the minor has historically welcomed a variety of students from variant levels of knowledge, understanding, and engagement in social justice and community action, the initial concept of DECLARE emerged from the frustration expressed by BIPOC students regarding classroom tensions and challenges among peers with limited identity awareness and social justice education knowledge. In partnership with the course instructor, a group of students organized and planned the concept of a student-led social justice retreat where students could critically reflect on their social identities, interests, motivations, and capacity to engage in community-based social change as a group project assignment. A specific goal of the curriculum was to center the experience and leadership of marginalized students actively engaged in educational justice work and, through peer-to-peer education, help others unpack their own social identity experiences, draw connections to their motivations for engagement in social change, de-center dominant ways of being informed by social privilege and power, and explore social justice frameworks (Mishkin & Richards-Schuster, 2016; Williams & Richards-Schuster, 2022).

Beyond the classroom, an opportunity to implement the students' retreat arose through a campus grant competition to support innovative and transformative ideas for the classroom. The students alongside faculty from the minor turned the retreat concept into a successful grant application and designed a student-led retreat DECLARE. With grant support from the university, students and faculty in the minor were able to host the retreat over multiple semesters. At the end of the grant, the course program evolved into a one-credit mini-course with structured support and resources to sustain the experience. Over the last

few years, the course construct provided the space to further evolve the content to a course informed by transformative education and justice frameworks and the SALT model.

SALT-DECLARE: A TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE LEADERSHIP COURSE

The integration of SALT arrived at a time where faculty and students wanted to promote a transformative justice leadership course that built upon the original DECLARE curriculum. The earlier iteration of DECLARE emphasized individual values, attitudes, and motivations in a change making process, and presented examples of social action skills and modalities of community practice. Separately, we established the SALT-DECLARE curriculum, as a credit-bearing 2-day social justice leadership retreat that advanced community organizing principles and practices informed by transformative education pedagogies and transformative justice organizing approaches. By leveraging SALT capacities, the course sought to promote consciousness-raising and leadership development through power and identity consciousness of structural, institutional, and systemic oppression; foster imaginative thinking, learning, and visioning toward justice centered social action, problem solving, and a solutions-orientation; and engage collectivist social action frameworks informed by community organizing principles, philosophies, and ideals.

SALT attends to limitations in leadership development scholarship and practice that present ambiguous definitions and applications of social change and justice, while also cultivating “leaders who can understand larger systemic social problems and effectively lead in ways that do not exacerbate existing systems of oppression, but that move the needle toward equity” (Museus et al., 2017, p. 6). The original DECLARE curriculum was established through the voice and action of BIPOC students in CASC, with an aim to promote social justice knowledge, awareness, and action. The re-structured SALT-DECLARE curriculum sought to foster deep critical-contextual perspectives of justice and action through transformational teaching methods, informed by local community organizing approaches that intentionally center marginalized voices, and the systemic effects of social harm.

By acknowledging and centering systemic oppression and social harm, the SALT-DECLARE curriculum fostered learning experiences that acknowledged institutional and structural inequality; centered marginalized voices, agency, and action; learned from grassroots community organizing approaches that highlight consensus-building and equitable decision-making; and bolstered collectivist visions and strategies toward co-liberationist change. Instructors and facilitators encouraged students to utilize SALT capacities to assess their prior knowledge, growth curves and learning edges; and as a tool for social justice leadership and engagement, beyond the classroom. The curriculum included six total modules over 16 h of instruction within a two-day weekend retreat format. For the purposes of the article, the following sections will provide a broad overview of each day of the curriculum. Additional details including teaching strategies, sample activities, learning objectives, and SALT capacities guiding the curriculum, are outlined in Table 1.

Day 1: Fostering critical consciousness through shared reflection and transparency

The first day of the minicourse involved (a) fostering critical consciousness through reflexive practice and identity awareness; (b) contextualizing forces of social inequality, power, privilege, and oppression; (c) establishing collective consciousness through community

TABLE 1 Transformative justice leadership retreat modular guide

Module	Learning objectives	Teaching methods	Sample activities	SALT capacities
Module 1: Creating a Safe and Brave Space	<p>Establish relationships with students and instructors through community building exercises</p> <p>Practice storytelling by articulating social, familial, and communal lived experiences, histories, and backgrounds</p> <p>Reflect on collective process for addressing conflict and challenge as a component of community participation and social justice leadership</p>	<p>Narrative Pedagogy and Storytelling (that is, interactive and experiential exercises, pair share, and large group debrief)</p> <p>Dialogue-informed facilitation</p>	<p>Self-reflection writing prompts</p> <p>Community Guidelines and Forward Spaces</p>	Critical empathy; Controversy with courage
Module 2: The SALT Leadership Model	<p>Engage in self-reflection about SALT capacities pertaining to individual strengths and growth curves</p> <p>Adapt SALT model as a learning and development tool</p> <p>Reflect on transformative and social justice leadership, using SALT model capacities as a framework</p>	<p>Community Building (that is, interactive and experiential exercises)</p> <p>Reflective Learning Methods (identify exploration and self-reflection; qualitative self-assessment; small group discussion)</p> <p>Lecture and Presentation</p>	<p>Concentric Circles (interactive group exercise with dyads, triads, and large group sharing)</p> <p>Written Reflections using SALT-Informed Self-Assessment Tool</p> <p>Instructor overview of SALT Model</p>	<p>Critical Empathy; Controversy with Courage; Equity in Purpose, Critical Consciousness; Value of Collection Action; Commitment to Social Justice; Coalescence</p>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Module	Learning objectives	Teaching methods	Sample activities	SALT capacities
Module 3: Building Social Justice Education Knowledge	Build shared knowledge of social justice language informed by concepts of power, privilege, and oppression Foster structuralist perspectives of social inequality by examining multi-leveled forms of social oppression	Peer-to-Peer Education (critical-conscientiousness raising) Dialogue-Informed Facilitation & Lecture (small group discussion; large group share out; instructor lecture; multimedia integration)	Concept Mapping (exploration of concepts through small and large group knowledge exchange about lived experiences and pressing social issues). Large Group Facilitation (including dialogic reflection about concepts, use of multimedia to present examples, and short presentations).	Equity in Purpose; Critical Consciousness; Controversy with Courage
Module 4: Exploring Individual Critical Consciousness and Positionality	Examine how identities shape political and social dimensions of lived experience Engage in a process of reflexivity by identifying individual relationship to sources of power as well as marginalization Engage in critical-contextual thinking by analyzing individual positionalities in changing environments Examine operations of social oppression through intersectional lenses and perspectives	Narrative Pedagogy and Storytelling Reflective Learning Methods (critical self-reflection) Dialogue-Informed Facilitation Dialogue-Informed Facilitation	Social Identity Reflection Worksheets Written Reflection, Pair Share, and Large Group Debrief Large Group Debrief and Discussion, Concentric Circles (rotating small group reflections with guided prompts).	Critical Consciousness; Critical Empathy; Controversy with Courage

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Module	Learning objectives	Teaching methods	Sample activities	SALT capacities
Module 5: Transformative Justice Leadership	Learn and practice principles of leadership from the context of community organizing	Case Study (Local Environmental Racism Organizing)	Engaged Case Study Engagement with Guest Lecture and Discussion	Value of Collective Action; Coalescence; Commitment to Justice
	Understand the difference between transactional and transformative leadership models	Case Study (Local Environmental Racism Organizing)	Engaged Case Study Engagement with Guest Lecture and Discussion	
	Explore multiple forms of collective action (i.e. coalition building, solidarity, co-resistance, co-liberation, movement building, etc.,) and reflect on their strengths and challenges, in social justice leadership	Interactive & Experiential Exercise	Theater of the Oppressed (TOP)	
	Engage co-liberationist perspectives of social justice action and leadership	Dialogue-Informed Facilitation	Small and Large Group Discussion and Debrief	
	Reflect on social justice leadership experiences and opportunities to practice lessons learned from transformative justice			

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Module	Learning objectives	Teaching methods	Sample activities	SALT capacities
Module 6: Healing Justice	Engage in justice-centered-contemplative practices, and reflect upon individual relationship to healing and restoration in social justice action contexts	Reflective Learning Methods (that is, critical self-reflection; somatic and contemplative practice; interactive & experiential exercises)	Guest Lecture and Presentation; Journaling; Mantra; Meditation; Yoga; Written Reflection; Small and Large Group Debrief	Coalescence; Commitment to Justice; Critical Consciousness
	Engage in mindfulness practices through anti-oppression perspectives	Reflective Learning Methods (that is, critical self-reflection; somatic and contemplative practice; interactive & experiential exercises)	Journaling; Mantra; Meditation; Yoga; Written Reflection; Small and Large Group Debrief	
	Examine the presence of harm and conflict in social injustice, and locate domains of restoration, healing, and accountability	Dialogue-Informed Facilitation	Small and Large Group Discussion and Debrief	
	Generate collective and sustainable practices of mindfulness.	Dialogue-Informed Facilitation	Small and Large Group Discussion and Debrief	

building, and group norm setting; and, (d) examining and engaging SALT capacities as a social justice education leadership and action model, highlighted in modules 1–4. Table 1 draws on a table from Lopez-Humphreys et al. (2022) to highlight teaching strategies, sample activities, learning objectives, and SALT capacities. Using narrative and storytelling pedagogies, critical identity reflection and co-constructed social justice language literacy activities allowed students to center elements of their lived experiences that inform their knowledge, awareness, and application of social action and change. Additionally, students engaged in structured dialogue and discussion about the ecological dimensions of systemic oppression, by engaging concrete socio-historical examples in tandem with their own identity-based lived experiences. For example, the minicourse was hosted at campus-based multicultural center whose mission is rooted in social activism, student leadership, and social change.

The particular room in which the course was held—*Sankofa Lounge*—displayed over 50 years of documented student-led-campus-racial-activism and public protest that addressed critical racial incidents and histories of the time. Using the space as a site for place-based-learning, students were asked to contextualize their involvement, engagement, and participation in social justice leadership within extant disparities today. As students engaged through guiding prompts in small and large group discussion, students were able to critically reflect on their positionality and the ways in which context and history are integral to collective action work. Developing group culture, norms, and relationships was vital to fostering a learning environment that promoted critical consciousness development. As instructors and facilitators, fostering co-learning and shared wisdom among students were important instruments of relationship and community building as well as meaningful engagement, throughout the course.

Setting a foundation of shared trust, vulnerability, and collective wisdom were core to the modular scaffold of the curriculum and central to students' learning experiences. Critical storytelling, community-norm setting, and trust-building were established through movement-based activities facilitated in dyads and triads as well as large group discussion allowed students to forge authentic and meaningful connections with other peers, instructors, and facilitators. Further, by establishing a teaching intervention that fostered critical consciousness in such a way that contends with self-in-context, students were able to discuss and unpack their positionalities in relation to leadership in practice, as well as within their vision for social justice and change.

Day 2: Learning from community: Lessons from grassroots

Day two of the minicourse emphasized macro social work practice by highlighting both definitions, constructions, and approaches to transformative justice in community organizing, and the role of healing and healing justice in social transformation. The goal of day two modules was to extrapolate the individual domain from the process of fostering collective action through coalescence. As such, students practiced critical contextual meaning making by adapting reflection exercises from Day 1 activities pertaining to power, privilege, and oppression into collective change making processes that involve group-based social action efforts (Reed et al., 2021). Facilitators shared methods of collective action that operationalize coalescence, using case study examples of local grassroots organizing, as well as experiential exercises involving theater. By design, the *Transformative Justice Leadership* module was organized to explicate historical and contemporary applications of transformative justice leadership in community contexts, engage in discussion and dialogue about strategies and approaches to transformative justice organizing through case

study, and to promote critical reflection through experiential exercises, simulation, and written reflection.

This curriculum was facilitated by a Detroit based organizer and educator whose work addressed environmental racism through coalition efforts within a local grassroots organization. The facilitator offered multiple case study examples of her experience navigating coalition organizing including its value and challenges within environmental justice spaces through both transactional and transformative modalities of change. By sharing her contextual experiences, students were able to learn about collective organizing approaches such as coalition building, co-resistance, and liberation, as well as the challenges, benefits, and barriers to fostering a shared social justice vision and practice through centering and non-hierarchical models of community participation and leadership. Students also explored various domains of action and highlighted the ways in which they may situate their own practice.

These modules concluded with reflection about the various ways in which systems of oppression become embedded in one's lived experience, habits, and behaviors. Students reflected on the relationship between their positionalities, social justice values, skills, and contributions in shaping their involvement and engagement in social change. In addition, how the nexus between their social identities, access to sources of power, and individual contributions become valued and devalued in group-based contexts where concrete solutions, products, and outcomes are prioritized. These reflections segued into the final segment of the day, facilitated by a separate facilitator who is a social work practitioner and educator as well as founding director of a local therapeutic practice with a mission to promote socially just and culturally affirming mental health practice among BIPOC communities. Within the *Healing Justice* module students examined the ways in which contemplative practice can be adapted at the individual and communal context to address harm, trauma, and conflict as a strategy toward transformation and healing. While many healing justice community approaches advance accountability structures and mechanisms to resolve harm, this module emphasized anti-oppressive mindfulness and the relationship between individual and community healing practices that promote wellness, care, and compassion. As a class, students, instructors, and the guest speaker engaged in a series of mindfulness exercises including movement-based-meditation, yoga stretches, journaling, and dialogue.

Course outcomes and implications

Program evaluation of the curriculum included pre and post survey data, and three reflection papers where students discussed knowledge and areas for deeper learning pertaining to SALT capacities, perspectives about transformative justice, and areas of growth and challenge in their social justice leadership development. Overall, students expressed a heightened awareness of ecological perspectives of social injustice, increased awareness of the knowledge, skills, and talents they bring to social action efforts within campus and community contexts. According to one student in engineering,

I learned about my strengths in my social justice work that I did not necessarily know that I already obtained. For example, I was able to reflect on some of my previous social action work and put a name to the skills I was enacting. It reaffirmed my belief that social justice work was the right place for me to thrive.

For some students, the popular education strategies resonated with their academic and personal interests. A music and theater student shared that “my passion for storytelling

through theater can help me work toward transformative justice. Storytelling makes people critically conscious. One thing I want to take away is looking at my passion for theater with an intersectional lens.” For this student, her training in the arts were directly aligned with strategies and approaches applied in social change work—however, amplifying this work through intersectional lenses were an important next step in her social change journey.

The healing justice module inspired many students to think about personal relationships to systems of oppression and healing practices that support their personal well-being as a proactive measure. One psychology student discussed a desire to choose “a better lifestyle to suit my mental, physical, and spiritual health through meditation, critical thinking, and advocacy for the self.” Healing justice for this student involved a radical care and protection of their wellbeing as a part of their capacity to sustain long-term engagement in social justice. Overall, the retreat allowed students to engage in meaningful dialogue and discussion with a wide range of students from various identities, academic disciplines, and levels of engagement in campus and community action.

The SALT-DECLARE curriculum presents an example of transformative education pedagogy in social work with the aim of fostering social justice leadership development. By centering the wisdom, expertise, and knowledge of BIPOC women of color educators, organizers, and practitioners, and adopting popular education teaching methods, the course demonstrated the value and outcome of storytelling and narrative work, encouraged praxis by linking reflection, theory, and action, and provided an affirming space to support student leadership development, in an academic environment. While additional research, evaluation, and reflection is needed to fully understand the possibilities of transformative justice approaches in the classroom, the DECLARE case study presents a framework for promoting the current and future generations of student and community activists.

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