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Transformative competencies: A guidance for Community Engaged Learning projects 2023



Transformative competencies

A GUIDANCE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING PROJECTS 2023

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1 Why this guidance on transformative competencies?

In an ever-changing world with conflict, poverty and climate decay, the scientific community has always had to make a difference in real-world problems. This has become even more pertinent since the UN has formulated 17 Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 which aims to address the most pressing global challenges of our time, including the ending of poverty, protecting the planet's ecosystems, and ensuring that all people live in peace and prosperity by 2030 (UN, 2015). This call underscores the renewed demand placed on the scientific community to meet a multitude of challenges such as addressing growing levels of social discontent (Brauch, Spring, Grin, Scheffran, 2016).

Does the scientific community equip students with the competencies necessary to make a valuable contribution to an ever-changing world? If it does not evolve teaching methods to meet current challenges, it runs the risk of staying behind and leaving students ill-prepared for taking up an active role in society. Therefore, the scientific community needs to re-evaluate the mission of higher education, of its teaching methods and philosophies (Lambrechts, 2012), now more than ever.

2 What are transformative competencies?

This re-evaluation entails examining what students need to learn in order to understand the complexities that arise within an interconnected system and to collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds, while keeping an eye towards the future (Frisk & Larsson, 2011). Teaching and training of *skills*, the specific, learned abilities needed to perform a certain job well, is crucial, yet not sufficient. Training *competencies* which builds on skills training is needed as well. It reorients the educational process towards the application of knowledge and skills in the real world (through Community Engaged Learning (CEL), for example). What is more, equipping students with *transformative competencies* around cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary collaboration may enable students to deal with the real-world problems. We define *transformative competencies* as a functionally linked set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values students need to transform society and shape the future for better lives (OECD, 2019a).

3 How to foster transformative competencies?

At the Utrecht University Centre for Global Challenges (UGlobe), we believe that CEL is one of the key didactic tools to promote and foster transformative competencies. CEL is experiential education in which students, teachers, and external partners work together on societal challenges, thus integrating societal engagement with academic study and reflection. CEL is often associated with *transformative learning* (Donahue & Plaxton-Moore 2018). In this context, transformative learning has been conceptualized by influential theorists (for instance Jack Mezirow) as a process of

effecting change in a frame of reference (Mezirow 2003, p. 58). It involves an internal transformation, often described in terms of changes in the ways of thinking, or a new view or perspective a person came to see or embrace (Donehue & Plaxton-Moore 2018). The lived experiences that prompt someone to critically reflect on assumptions and interpretations can cause a shift in frame of reference. In the same vein, experience and reflection help students to acquire competencies (Biberhofer & Bockwoldt, 2016) while at the same time contributing to community needs.

4 How to use this guidance

The Mission of UGlobe and its International Community Engaged Learning LAB features experimentation and transformation. As part of this mission, we offer this guidance as a conversation starter for students, teachers and stakeholders to stimulate reflexive exchanges on curriculum development in a broader sense and how to understand ‘transformation’ in relation to education. Teachers can draw inspiration from it when planning, shaping or evaluating education, including CEL-projects. We welcome reflections and feedback on both the selection and formulation of the competencies and look forward to future conversations about key competencies in general¹.

On the basis of the literature, we have identified nine transformative competencies that students may need in order to contribute to and thrive in our world, and thereby shape a better future. These competencies are not meant to be exhaustive. We have listed and explained them in the table in the next section. Additionally, in the subsequent section, we provide 2 examples from practice to show how transformative competencies can take shape in CEL teaching.

5 Nine transformative competencies

Transformative competency	Meaning
1. Stakeholder engagement and group collaboration	CEL requires the scientific community and its partners to collaborate for the achievement of a common goal that is mutually beneficial. Such collaboration, across disciplines and with a wide variety of stakeholders, can help to confront complex global challenges. In this way, multiple views on how to address ‘wicked’ problems can be equitably incorporated (Frisk & Larsson, 2011).
2. Discovering, exploring and reconciling tensions and dilemmas	In an interdependent world, students need to be able to navigate different logics and demands, and become comfortable with complexity and ambiguity. This requires empathy and respect towards others who hold views different from their own. This competency is about gaining an understanding of (seemingly) contradictory or incompatible ideas or logics and learning to find (arguments to support) students’ own position and exploring practical solutions to dilemmas. The competency also links to (or encompasses) problem-solving skills, the ability to devise new and different solutions to seemingly intractable problems (OECD, 2019a).
3. Taking responsibility	Students who take responsibility can think for themselves and work with others. There is a sense of maturity in their actions, the ability to critically reflect and evaluate one’s own acting. Taking responsibility requires a strong motivation to succeed, self-confidence, commitment to completing a task, a belief in the power of hard work, and a focus on the future rather than the present. It relies for a great part on self-regulation; the ability to control our emotions, thoughts, and behaviours is what enables us to stay focused, especially when things get difficult, unpleasant, or tedious. It requires teachers to find ways of providing chances for youth to exercise independence and self-control (OECD, 2019b)

Transformative competency	Meaning
4. Action-orientation and change-agent skills	Engaging students in active, applied learning will not only increase their understanding of the content but will also instill in them the importance of action and engagement throughout their lives. Action learning is a form of experiential learning in which students are asked to question their assumptions and apply new knowledge and skills to diverse situations to bring about change. Engaging students with a challenge as a change agent is not just about 'doing', it is also about understanding the implications of their actions, which requires emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and understanding of normative aspects of problems and potential solutions. Action learning, combined with systems thinking, stakeholder engagement, and foresighted thinking, can facilitate students' development as sustainability change agents (Frisk & Larsson, 2011).
5. Learning from failure and building resilience	Productive failure is the possibility of designing conditions that may not maximize performance in the short term, but in fact maximize learning in the longer term (Kapur, 2008). It engages students in solving problems requiring concepts they have yet to learn. To the extent that students are able to use their prior knowledge to generate suboptimal or even incorrect solutions to the problem, the process can be productive in preparing them to learn better from the subsequent instruction that follows (Kapur & Bielaczyc, 2012). By failure, it is meant that students will not be able to generate or discover the correct solutions by themselves. In the process of learning from failure, students are building up resilience, increasing their ability to cope with and bounce back from adversity.
6. Systems thinking and an understanding of interconnectedness	A systems perspective acknowledges that the world is increasingly interconnected and decisions made in one area affect others in a complex array of local to global, human-environment interactions and impacts. Progressing toward sustainability entails grappling with these dynamics in the face of multiple potentially conflicting objectives, such as improving societal welfare, providing economic opportunities, and restoring or protecting life-supporting ecosystems (Frisk & Larsson, 2011). Students can acquire systems-thinking skills when they see how the processes, impacts, trade-offs and win-wins that making decisions for a sustainable future can entail in real-life situations.
7. Deep learning	Deep learning, or second order learning, is an effective way to gauge the degree of transformation in which the fundamental assumptions, values, and identities of a society, organization, or individual are re-evaluated (Hjorth & Bagheri, 2006). It involves paying attention to underlying meaning. Deep learning is associated with the use of analytic skills, cross-referencing, imaginative reconstruction, and independent thinking. This style of learning is dependent on a student's level of engagement with the topic. The student has to be internally motivated and is associated with an intention to understand rather than to simply pass an assessment task. Thus, a priority for the scientific community must be to provide an environment where students develop a strong personal interest in tackling global challenges (Warburton, 2003).
8. Long-term, fore-sighted thinking	At the core of sustainability work is a long term ('sustaining') or future orientation. This orientation calls for ways of understanding and envisioning the future – asking questions about long-term trends and possible future scenarios. It also entails finding ways to prevent harmful consequences (of e.g. climate change and current decision making) by employing 'anticipatory approaches to understand, mitigate, or adaptively prepare for future changes in system dynamics' (Frisk & Larsson, 2011:8).

Transformative competency	Meaning
<p>9. Creating new value</p>	<p>Creating new value is an advanced competency which involves the ability to adapt to new experiences and developments and also to innovate, creating new ideas, insights or knowledge. When learners create new value, they question the status quo, collaborate with others, and try to think “outside-the-box” in order to find innovative solutions. So, students need adaptability as they change their approaches based on new and emerging insights and findings. At the same time, students need to have a sense of purpose, autonomy and curiosity, while keeping an open mindset towards new ideas, perspectives and experiences. These abilities are key constructs associated with creating new value (OECD, 2019a; Grayling 2017).</p>

6 Examples from teaching practice

Example 1:

‘AFTER THE DUST SETTLES’ - TRANSFORMATIVE COMPETENCIES IN AN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING PROJECT

Hawija. The name of the Iraqi town that continues to cause controversy in Dutch public debates. On June 3, 2015, Dutch F-16s bombed an Islamic State ammunition factory in Hawija as part of the ongoing US led Coalition war against IS. The airstrike had immense consequences: over 18.000 kilograms of munition detonated, destroying nearly two entire neighborhoods, killing a suspected 70 civilians, and injuring hundreds more. In the wake of this destruction, however, nobody was allowed to know who carried out the attack and the Coalition did not publicly acknowledge the civilian harm done. It took four and a half years before Dutch investigative journalists were able to unearth that in fact the Netherlands was responsible for the attack.

The UU research programme [The Intimacies of Remote Warfare \(IRW\)](#), led by dr. Lauren Gould, first studied the political reactions when civilian harm in remote interventions can no longer be kept under wraps. Their article [‘Strategic ignorance and the legitimization of remote warfare: The Hawija bombardments’](#) (Security Dialogue 2022), dr. Gould and dr. Stel illustrate how the official Dutch government’s narrative “shifted from denial to secrecy to strategic ignorance”, namely ultimately the Dutch government claimed that they did not know and nobody could ever know the levels of harm done to the civilians in Hawija. Gould & Stel conclude that denying not just the existence of civilian harm but the ability to know about it effectively undermines institutional checks and balances and democratic accountability – in the realm of war but potentially also beyond.

Engaging Stakeholders in a research project: informed by these insights, in 2020 IRW teamed up with Dutch NGO [Pax for Peace](#) and Iraqi NGO Al-Ghad to prove that one could investigate the reverberating civilian harm effects of the 2015 Dutch airstrike in Hawija. The researchers visited Hawija multiple times and interviewed 119 victims and 40 key respondents to define the direct and indirect consequences of the bombing. By doing so, they were the first to clearly define the direct and indirect civilian harm effects of the event, discovering that at least 85, not the presumed 70, civilians were killed. Their findings not only highlight the devastating and compounding impact of remote bombing, but also shows how people give meaning to the harm that was done to them. Civilians in Hawija resent the Dutch government for ignoring the civilian harm they caused and demand an apology and individual compensation.

An International Community Engaged project: Simultaneously IRW initiated an [International Community Engagement Learning \(ICEL\)](#) project together with PAX. Led by dr. Lauren Gould, a team of interdisciplinary bachelor and master students in Conflict Studies sought to cut through the secrecy and distance surrounding the Hawija bombardment by examining social media discourses surrounding this attack to understand the narratives constructed and meanings made by those affected. This ICEL project set out

to complement the data that PAX, IRW and Al-Ghad was collecting on the ground in Hawija with a social media analysis of over 300 posts about the event. Ultimately the students engaged also helped IRW, and NGOs Pax and Al-Ghad code the 159 interviews returning from Hawija. They did so by collectively coding the interviews in the qualitative analysis programme NVIVO and discussing the patterns they found with IRW and Pax every week.

The above research culminated in the report '[After the Dust Settles](#)' (2021) and the IRW, PAX and Al-Ghad '[After the Strike](#)' (2022). The report and its findings were picked up widely across Dutch and international media, [see here](#) for an overview. A day after its release the Dutch Ministry of Defence (MoD) announced [new civilian harm transparency policies](#), illustrating how much our research in Hawija put pressure on the MoD to improve its transparency records. The team launched the joint report '[After the Strike](#)', during a [sold-out live event at De Balie, Amsterdam](#).

Transformative Competencies: The interdisciplinary students involved in this Community Engaged Learning project developed the following transformative competencies:

Stakeholder engagement and group collaboration: First and foremost, the students not only learned how to engage in interdisciplinary team science amongst each other, they learnt how to collaborate with three stakeholders, namely Dutch NGOs Pax for Peace and Iraqi NGO Al-Ghad in conducting the research on Hawija. In addition, they were also allowed to sit in with negotiations with the Dutch Ministry of Defence that led to a new transparency policy vis-à-vis monitoring and acknowledging civilian harm.

The combination of conducting both research on the different forms of (interpretations of) civilian harm that occurred in Hawija on the one hand and sitting in with negotiations with the MoD, taught the students *systems thinking and an understanding of interconnectedness* as well as *action-orientation and change agent skills*. With time, the students became aware that the knowledge they were creating in their research on Hawija, put the right amount of pressure on the MoD to work on a new civilian harm transparency policy. Throughout, the students kept reflecting on the implications of their actions, while they had to navigate complex relationships across very different institutions (university, international and local NGOs and the MoD). This required emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and an understanding of the normative aspects of problems and potential solutions.

Finally, all of the above required the students to take a huge amount of *responsibility* throughout the project. They ran the social media research project nearly entirely on their own, while showing a huge amount of maturity and professionalism in their interactions with the societal stakeholders involved.

Afterwards, the students who took part in the project started jobs at the Ministry of Foreign affairs, the Red Cross and a Conflict Analysis firm, where they apply these transformative competencies in their daily work.

Example 2:

INTERNATIONAL MASTER'S PROGRAMME 'ORGANISING SOCIAL IMPACT' - TRANSFORMATIVE COMPETENCIES THROUGH A COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING PROGRAM

To effectively address the grand challenges of our time, such as increasing inequality and widespread poverty, the climate emergency, and the risks inherent to data monopolies, novel forms of organising our livelihoods and new ways of policymaking are needed. A key question driving the programme is: *How can we organise in ways that foster more just and sustainable institutions and society?* This programme welcomes students from all over the globe who are interested in transforming society through their own theoretically informed, self-reflective, and action-oriented engagement. It caters to a new generation of students with diverse, relevant educational backgrounds who do not eschew critically questioning institutional legacies.

Our programme is established on three main premises:

- 1. Community-engaged learning:** The programme structurally collaborates with grassroots, non-profit and private organisations committed to making the society more sustainable, inclusive and just. Therefore, the programme focuses on building longer-term collaboration with organisational partners who are already social innovators.
- 2. Critical research-informed teaching:** The offered courses in the programme draw from a multiplicity of social and critical theories related to organisations and organising. Therefore, the programme is inherently interdisciplinary, reflected in the students' diverse backgrounds, including but not limited to organisation studies, cultural anthropology, psychology, sociology, public administration, management and art history.
- 3. Doing (activist) research with/for communities:** As part of establishing long-term links between partner organisations, students are engaged with the organisational practices and conduct their own research projects. This relationship enables the involvement of the relevant organisational actors, helps students consider their needs and facilitates a transdisciplinary co-production of knowledge process for social change. Therefore, it is inherently activist and social change-oriented with/for communities. This process also informs the teaching practices and brings multiple epistemological questions to the classroom.

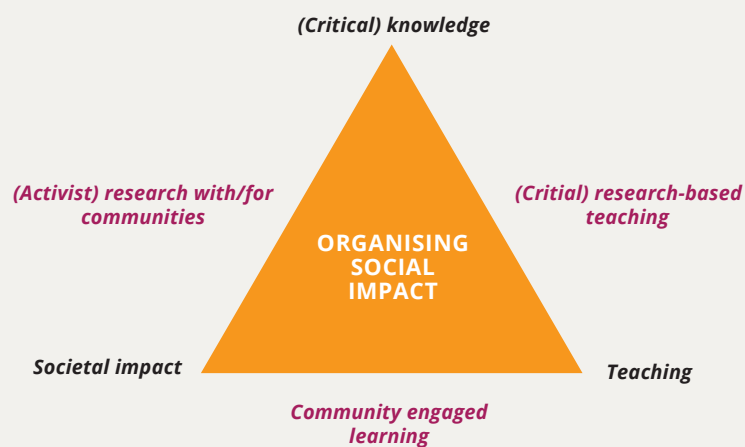


Figure 1: Conceptual model of Organising Social Impact Programme

Engaged Research Fieldwork

Early in the programme, students are matched with a partner organisation, and for periods three and four (about five months), they conduct their engaged research fieldwork. In this way, they not only "get their hands dirty" with the challenges of organising social impact on the ground (i.e. practice) but also use this experience as input for their theses in conversation with academic literature (i.e. theory). The engaged research fieldwork process contributes to the day-to-day social change efforts of the partner organisations. It facilitates mutual learning opportunities both for the organisational members and the students.

Through our programme, students develop the following transformative competencies:

- **Stakeholder engagement and group collaboration:** Our students build sustainable and reliable relationships with partner organisations and their stakeholders. As junior collaborators, they engage with various groups within and beyond the organisational context as a part of their engaged research fieldwork.
- **Discovering, exploring and reconciling tensions and dilemmas:** Due to the nature of the pressing societal challenges and the role of the partner organisations, students witness how the process of 'organising social impact' is messy. Through integrating theory and practice, with the help of critical and reflexive theories, they identify power relations, their embeddedness/positionality within these relations and the role of organisations/organisational members in handling contradictions. As a part of their research engagement, they also navigate the tensions between their researcher, collaborator and student identities.
- **Taking responsibility:** Beginning with the fieldwork, under the organisational and academic supervision, the students take responsibility for their role in the organisations, activities in which they are involved, and their own research process. This is also a quality assessed in the final thesis evaluation.

- *Action-orientation and change-agent skills:* Given the profile and scope of the partner organisations, students become 'junior collaborators' and begin contributing to organisational activities directly impacting communities and relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, owing to the flexibility of the programme and partner organisations, they either take the lead in an ongoing process related to social change or bring their own project/research ideas.
- *Systems thinking and an understanding of interconnectedness:* As a complementary process to in-class discussions, this competence is particularly relevant to the utilisation of (critical) theories to comprehend the relational and complex aspects of societal challenges, the agency of organising within, against and beyond multiple pressures and understanding the bigger picture of structural relations.
- *Deep Learning:* Through the engaged research fieldwork period, the students immerse themselves not only into the theories but also in the messiness of day-to-day organising social impact. This dual interaction between theory and practice serves for individual transformation (thanks to engagement with the organisational context) and organisational transformation (thanks to the students' contribution). It is a mutually constitutive and developmental process in which the outcome advances students' and organisational learning capabilities.
- *Creating new value:* Owing to the structural collaboration with the partner organisations and student involvement in organisational practices, students naturally become part of creating new value. This process of new value creation takes place in multiple forms – coming up with an idea about an organisational practice, developing an activity within or beyond the organisation's scope, and researching the organisation itself and the societal challenge(s) it seeks to tackle.

Bringing the competencies together

In the 2022-2023 academic year, one of the students conducted her engaged research fieldwork in the partner organisation 'Commons Network', a collaboratory and think tank on alternative economic models and economic transformation. During her fieldwork, our student contributed to the organisation's blog about 'alternative currencies', engaged with organisational partners as a part of her collaboration, and researched monetary transformation through the Makkie time bank in the Amsterdam-Oost. Her thesis defence took place at the Commons Network and was attended by time bank practitioners, an official from Amsterdam Municipality, other alternative currency initiators in Amsterdam and organisational researchers. Through this experience, she developed all the competencies mentioned above – built and managed new relations with stakeholders, took the lead for organisational practice and her own social impact-oriented research, witnessed the complexities of organising alternative currencies for social change, created new value for not only herself but also for the organisation and broader society and enabled infrastructures of deep learning for those involved.

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