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Taking a Structural Approach to Civic Education in Aotearoa New Zealand¹

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Conventionally, civic education has sought to enhance students' sense of civic agency by fostering civic literacy and other relevant capacities, with a particular emphasis on civic action in relation to formal political and civic institutions. Yet students' diminished sense of agency has as much to do with the complex, endemic, and seemingly intractable issues that characterize current politics—climate change, settler-colonialism, socioeconomic inequality—as it does with disenchantment or difficulty engaging with formal institutions. This chapter discusses an upper-level undergraduate course from Aotearoa New Zealand that puts this question of agency at its center, and takes a uniquely structural approach to addressing it. We identify two key features of this structural approach to civic education, showing via student testimonies that a strong majority of students observe this course has had significant impact on their sense of civic agency, and that the course's structural approach was a primary contributor to this.

KEYWORDS: Civic Agency, Structural Injustice, Non-Institutional, Civic Action, Efficacy.

Introduction

Civic agency—the ability to act to influence the society in which one lives out of concern for it—is considered a “basic principle of an equitable, democratic society.”² Yet it hinges on a number of contingencies, including civic literacy, effective channels for voice, structural and personal conditions that determine one’s resources, and a sense of agency. This last requirement—a sense of agency, or confidence in one’s ability to act—is as key to having agency as these other objective factors, and correlates closely with whether one acts at all.³ According to the Carnegie Foundation’s Political Engagement Project (PEP), the key aim of civic education is to increase students’ sense of efficacy, “the necessary attribute of civically engaged citizens.”⁴ Conventionally, civic education has sought to do this by fostering civic literacy and other relevant capacities, with a particular emphasis on civic action in relation to formal political and civic institutions.⁵ Indeed, the existing literature gives little if any attention to non-institutional factors that either impinge upon or contribute to a sense of civic agency. Yet many of the issues that most concern our students, from climate change to racism, are best described as structural issues that are sustained by far more than the mechanisms of formal politics; likewise, with global surges of climate strikes and social movements, our students are witnessing and experiencing a range of extra-institutional civic activities. How might we reconfigure civic education when such features

characterize the contexts within which our students as citizens seek to act?

In this chapter, we offer an account of an upper-level undergraduate political science course that sought to foster a sense of agency among its students through a novel approach to civic education: a structural approach. A structural lens on civic education, we argue, both enriches students' analytic capacities regarding many of the sociopolitical issues that they as citizens seek to engage, and enhances their strategic capacities when discerning and designing appropriate forms of civic action to address such issues. Taking a structural approach can thus contribute to developing one of the key aims of civic education: a sense of efficacy. This is certainly what we heard from our 117 students over 2019 and 2020, 90% of whom noted increased awareness of structural injustice in society and a different perception of their own sense of agency as a result of taking this course, and 37% of whom specified particular civic actions they were now taking as a response to what they learned. Moreover, surveyed 6 months and 18 months after the course had ended, 66% of students stated this course had been very relevant or useful to them as a citizen.⁶

In what follows, we first outline the context in which we are teaching this course in a political science department in Aotearoa New Zealand. We then describe what we mean by a structural approach' to civic education, noting that this frame enables both a systems analysis of key contemporary sociopolitical issues and development of a novel repertoire of ten genres of civic action in relation to these systems. A structural approach, we contend, addresses one of the key issues in civic engagement education—how to improve students' sense of their own efficacy. After establishing our theoretical contribution to the scholarship, we then provide a brief synopsis of the course itself before detailing the research design by which we evaluated the course's impacts on students' sense of agency. Our data consists of students' summative reflections on their learning, a final piece of assessment in which we ask them to reflect on their learning experiences across the trimester, as well as their responses to a follow-up survey six months and eighteen months after the course. Using this data, we investigate the extent to which this course: affected students' perspectives on the sociopolitical issues they seek to impact; increased their sense of their own agency; and led to greater or more varied civic action as a result. Without question, our 117 students over 2019 and 2020, both immediately following and after the course, have attested to these impacts. In light of these results, we argue that a structural approach to civic engagement enhances a sense of civic agency, both by developing a sense of the contexts in which they seek, as citizens, to intervene as complex, interdependent, and open at multiple sites to contestation, and by broadening and nuancing their sense of the diverse forms of action available to them within such contexts. We conclude, therefore, that a structural approach to civic education effectively fosters one of the key aims of civic education, that of civic efficacy. We end the chapter with final considerations for such an approach in practice.

Civic Engagement Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

In Aotearoa New Zealand, formal civics education requirements have been conspicuously absent from primary and secondary school curricula.⁷ In recent years, movements to support civics education in schools have gained some momentum in the form of specifically designed civics modules, though their elective status means that most students come to post-secondary education with little formal education about their status as citizens, whether in relation to political institutions or as citizens in community.⁸ Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, where we teach, is one of eight universities in Aotearoa, all of which are publicly funded. With roughly 850 students enrolled in a political science major or minor, our Political Science and International Relations program is one of the largest in the country. A three-year Bachelor of Arts degree with a political science major requires that students complete at least two introductory, three mid-level, and two upper-level courses in political science. Our course, *POLS353: Contemporary Challenges and Directions for New Zealand Politics*, is one of six 300-level courses offered by our program, and around 60 students take this course each year—some majoring in the subject, and others not.

Located in the nation's capital, our political science program attracts students with a particular interest in studying political science, and after graduation many of our students seek out careers

in the civil service, NGOs, and parliament. As instructors in political theory and New Zealand politics, we observed that due to our program's focus on formal politics and institutions, many of our students were graduating with little understanding of politics beyond such terms, or of themselves as civic actors. We designed POLS353 in order to address this perceived gap, to equip our students with a distinctly civic education before they are among the nation's civic and political leaders. With surges of transnational protest in the name of climate action, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter in mind, and inspired by contemporary political theory, we designed the course to give students an opportunity to explore some of our most pressing sociopolitical issues as well as a suite of non-institutional forms of civic action, each via a structural lens. As such, our key learning objectives for the course are for students to be able to:

1. Describe and analyze three defining challenges of the contemporary sociopolitical landscape of Aotearoa NZ using a structural lens;
2. Critically compare and evaluate multiple forms of civic action in response to these challenges;
3. Apply this knowledge to critically reflect on the possibilities and challenges of active citizenship in Aotearoa NZ today.⁹

Over the first six weeks of this 12-week course, we introduce students to theories of structural injustice and then explore three major contemporary sociopolitical issues in Aotearoa New Zealand—climate change, socioeconomic inequality, and settler-colonialism—using this structural lens. We then provide an introduction to theories of civic agency and action in week seven, and in the remaining five weeks of the course explore ten genres of civic action in relation to the structural approach introduced at the outset of the course. The particular pedagogical and assessment techniques with which we run and assess learning in the course share much in common with those that civic education scholars find most conducive to fostering a sense of civic agency. Given the importance placed on cultivating an ongoing practice of *structured reflection*, in lieu of conventional essays, our students' main assignment is an ongoing reflective journal in response to weekly prompts, culminating in a summative reflection asking students to connect course learning to their own sense of civic agency.¹⁰ To enable *dialogue and collaboration across difference* and provide *research and action projects*, students also work in small groups to design and facilitate weekly one-hour workshops following lectures, where they present original research on specific case studies that exemplify the structural issue or forms of civic action studied that week, and facilitate civic dialogue about them.¹¹ Within these two major assignments, we encourage *perspective-taking* by asking workshop groups to present their chosen case studies through consideration of multiple stakeholder vantages, while weekly journal prompts also give opportunities to identify privileged and excluded perspectives in recent Op-Eds regarding course issues, and to interview someone close to them regarding their experiences of civic action. We *connect students to politically active communities* via guest speakers whose civic activities exemplify the ten forms of action we study, and invite them via journal prompts to seek out and reflect upon field experiences of civic action over the term. We are also emphatically *student-led* at every opportunity: from journal prompts to student-run workshops to class activities, we continually invite students to explicitly identify, draw upon, and reflect on their own lived relationships to the issues and activities we study, and to have these perspectives and passions flesh out course content.¹²

And yet, because of the course's distinctly *structural* approach to civic engagement education, what these pedagogical strategies have allowed us to reveal and develop with students is notably different. A structural approach has led us to engage contemporary issues like climate change and economic inequality as complex systems; likewise, it has led us to not only focus on non-institutional forms of action, but to understand and analyze these relationally, as interacting via complex and dynamic relays in diverse ways within the "socio-structural processes" that characterize a given issue.¹³ We argue that it is these two distinct accents on what counts as the substance of civic

engagement, both made possible by a structural approach, that have been critical in revealing, engaging, and developing a highly distinct set of questions and capacities for our students related to civic engagement. Perhaps most importantly, as a consequence of this approach, students come away with a pronounced sense of both civic responsibility and civic agency, as our data presented below shows.

A Structural Approach to Civic Engagement Education

As noted earlier, most civic education focuses on competencies and literacy regarding institutional and formal politics in order to foster students' sense of efficacy. A structural approach to civic education has led to two notable innovations in this course regarding the substance of civic education. The first is a systems understanding of key contemporary sociopolitical issues, which aims to give students a new evaluative lens through which to understand the key sociopolitical challenges with which they are already familiar. The second, revealed through a systems analysis, is an emphasis on largely extra-institutional forms of civic action.

Structural injustice: A systems approach to civic context

We draw on the work of political theorists Iris Marion Young and Romand Coles to explore how various pressing sociopolitical issues can be understood as *structural* when they cannot be attributed solely to individual actions, policies, or sheer bad luck. For Young and others, 'structural injustice' exists when large-scale processes create predictable patterns of opportunity or constraint for social groups; what is unjust, in such circumstances, is this systemic distribution according to social position. Importantly, Young's account shows that socio-structural injustices are largely the result of unintended consequences by the majority of citizens accepting these socio-structural processes as both legitimate and insignificant as they go about their personal projects.¹⁴

The commonsense notion of these structures being as monolithic and immutable as "natural laws" is, for Young, one of the key sources of inaction in addressing structural injustice, as it can feed a sense of powerlessness.¹⁵ To counter this sense, we introduce students to Coles' work on complex systems theory, in which he shows that systems are far more open to intervention than we often believe. We explore with students how these systems, despite seeming stable, are constituted and sustained through continual relays and interaction effects, and thus are susceptible to influence throughout. These theories of sociopolitical processes serve as overarching heuristics for the course, examining each of the course's three core issues—climate change, settler-colonialism, and socioeconomic inequality—using a structural lens.

Relational repertoires: A systems approach to civic action

The second substantive innovation involves connecting this structural analysis of key contemporary issues to questions of civic agency and action. Alongside more conventional definitions of civic agency, we explore how agency itself is a structural issue, given that structural conditions greatly impact both one's own capacities and perceptions of agency (*internal efficacy*¹⁶), as well as how responsive the channels for democratic voice are (*external efficacy*¹⁷). Influenced by this structural approach, we emphasize that agency is also a collective property, enabled or diminished in continual relation to the ecosystem of relations to other actors, sites, and practices. Finally, just as structural injustice is sustained through the countless daily actions of citizens, to change it "requires," as Young notes, "collective action, and that requires organization."¹⁸ Socio-structural processes are at once the conditions and outcomes of civic agency.

We define civic action, with Adler and Goggin as well as McCartney, as any form of action that citizens take that is at once civic, transformational, and reflective.¹⁹ Understanding structural issues as sustained by the interaction between multiple sites, norms, and practices also highlights how these issues are challenged and changed through a similar diversity of civic actions. We spend the final five weeks of the course exploring ten genres of civic action, each seeking to affect the

same sociopolitical issues via a distinct “theory of change.” Each week we examine two of these genres, paired to draw out key differences and relationships: (i) Strategic and Prefigurative Action; (ii) Institutional and Direct Action; (iii) Public Spectacle and Everyday Organizing; (iv) Disruption and Education; and (v) Deliberative and Affective Action. These conceptual distinctions help students extend a structural analysis to civic action, as these pairings highlight the distinct means, aims, and impacts of various actions all seeking to change the same sociopolitical issues, as well as how these forms of action interact and impact on one another. As Romand Coles describes, “each system is entangled with others in relationships of symbiosis, parasitism, and conflict, and these relationships are dynamic, phasing in and out of resonance and dissonance according to myriad factors.”²⁰ Taking a structural approach to civic action as much as to injustice, we emphasize that no one form of action can solely make change, and it is through the interaction effects between such diverse forms that structural change occurs. Core questions we explore throughout the course, therefore, are:

1. What is the appropriate form of action for a particular context, with a particular group of people, with a particular aim?
2. How might different forms of action work in relationship to effect change regarding the same issue?

For example, a juxtaposition between “strategic” and “prefigurative” action allows us to explore approaches to change that either strategically find the most expedient means to leverage resources to attain a goal²¹ or alternatively, those that align means and ends such that present relations and actions “prefigure” the future we wish for.²² This conceptual infrastructure allows us to explore how strategic and prefigurative approaches to social transformation can produce highly distinct forms of action that can, at times, be in tension and even conflict—for instance, regarding the use of violence, the value placed on consensus, or focus on cultural as well as material objectives—and yet can also enable, enhance, or shelter the other, as we see in the prefigurative forms of economy and community that the strategic protest actions of Occupy Wall Street made possible.

Research Design

In order to assess the impact of this structural approach to civic education on our students’ sense of agency, we use two key sources of data. One of these is the final course assignment, the **summative student reflection**, in which students identify their key learning experiences from the term, including what impact, if any, these have had on how students think about or practice citizenship and civic action.²³ In these reflections, we intentionally pose open-ended questions for the students to use as a guide, so that they are able to reflect on their own learning rather than feel constrained or guided by our objectives as instructors. Because we did not include specific questions eliciting responses focused on our course learning objectives pertaining to either the course’s structural approach or civic agency, these reflections serve as a particularly rich data source because they reflect what students independently identified as their key learning from the course. Moreover, this data set captures the responses of all students who completed the course, and thus reflects the full range of experiences.

To evaluate the extent to which students’ sense of agency had developed in light of this course, we looked for two indicators: whether they evidenced either (i) an improved sense of agency or (ii) greater civic engagement as a result of the course. We also analyzed these reflections for the extent to which students demonstrated (iii) a structural approach to contemporary issues and civic action. To determine the frequency of students relating these three core objectives, we used this coding scheme in our content analysis:

1. We looked for language that explicitly specified a different perception of students’ sense of agency as a result of taking the course. In 5 cases we inferred

this sense of agency based on the wider reflection, for example where students noted civic actions they had taken *as a result of* the course.

2. To identify increases in civic engagement, we only counted responses where students named a *specific* action they had taken, and where they explicitly claimed this was a result of this course. We also included instances where students who were already civically active tried new forms of engagement, and attributed this to the course. Though many students said they felt empowered to be more civically engaged after taking this course, or intended to be in the future, we determined that only counting named actions was a stronger measure of engagement, as some students may have indicated a willingness to be more civically engaged in the context of an assessment. Coding only for specific instances, however, means that this figure likely underrepresents those who may have been more civically engaged but did not refer to their specific actions in their reflection, or who had not yet taken action but did do so shortly after completing the course.

3. To identify the use of a structural analysis by students, we looked for language specifically referencing the course's two guiding texts (Young and Coles) regarding structural injustice and complex systems theory, as well as broader analysis that evidenced the applications of such conceptual frameworks.

The second source of data is a **voluntary anonymous follow-up survey**, conducted 18 months after the 2019 course, and 6 months after the 2020 course. This provides a longitudinal lens on the impacts of the course, gauging whether ideas from the course remained significant or useful, or continued to inform students' actions. We attribute this survey's 43% response rate across both cohorts in part to the challenges of conducting a survey during a pandemic, as well as the same factors that contribute to low response rates experienced across the university for online student evaluations. Despite the limitations in this data, responses indicate that the course's impacts regarding its core objectives continued to be felt for a significant number of students even some time after the course ended. We find it particularly notable that the 2019 cohort response rate was higher (51%), when the course was offered in a fully in-person format, compared with the more recent 2020 cohort response (35%), where the course was moved online after 3 weeks due to the pandemic.

In this survey, we measured our objectives more directly, by asking multiple choice questions that focused on each of the three variables, with an additional question asking more broadly about the effect of the course on students' sense of citizenship:

1. Has this course improved your sense of civic agency?
2. Has this course encouraged you to be more civically engaged?
3. Have you taken a structural approach to issues or actions more as a result of this course?
4. Please indicate how relevant or useful this course has been for you as a citizen, whether of Aotearoa or elsewhere.

Students were able to choose from three possible responses that indicated no effect (i.e. "not at all"), some effect (i.e., "somewhat"), or a significant effect (i.e., "a lot"/"very"). In addition to the multiple-choice questions, we also offered open-ended responses to elicit more information about what, in particular, stood out for students, the kinds of civic action they are now engaged in, and whether these ideas or actions are connected to the course.

Findings

Across both data sets, there is clear and substantial evidence that students were influenced on all three measures, indicating across the board: (i) an increased sense of their own agency as citizens, (ii) more civic engagement as a result of the course (both during and after the course), and (iii) a clear understanding of the structural dimensions of sociopolitical issues. Below, we summarize our findings for each data set, showing the extent of these effects. What stands out to us is that, even some time after the course is completed, students continue to recognize and act on this structural account of civic action.

Table 1 summarizes our findings from the summative reflections (the last assessment completed for the course), showing support for the course learning objectives across all three measures, in particular, an *improved sense of civic agency* (90% overall) and a *structural approach* (90% overall). A smaller but sizable percentage of the class indicated that they were *more civically engaged*, with 46% of the 2019 cohort and 27% of the 2020 cohort noting a specific action they had taken as a result of the class.

As a result of the course students indicated:	2019 57 students	2020 60 students	Overall 117 students
Increased sense of civic agency	55 (96%)	51 (85%)	90%
More civically engaged	26 (46%)	16 (27%)	37%
A structural approach	51 (89%)	55 (92%)	90%

As noted in many of the 2020 summative reflections, COVID-19 affected both students' engagement with the course overall (the course was moved online after 3 weeks), as well as opportunities for civic engagement, which is reflected in these lower levels of action. Yet the relatively high percentage of action in the 2019 cohort is cause for optimism, especially given the nature and scope of the activities they had performed in response to this course: some volunteering for the first time for various non-profit organizations or civic events; many making their first Select Committee submission or attending their first protest; several becoming involved in their first advocacy campaign; a number joining political parties or voting in their first local body election; many writing their MPs or particular Ministers, and also encouraging others to do so, which as one student notes, "I would not have done before"; some changing their consumer practices; many becoming increasingly active on social media "to disperse information that relates to the changes I wish to see for my community," with one student starting their own NZ politics webpage; and many noting they now attend more marches and sign more petitions than they did prior to the course. From peace advocacy to revitalization of the Māori language, climate strikes to Black Lives Matter, protesting against plastic use to refugee integration, Indigenous sovereignty to arming the police, students noted that they felt motivated by this course to take actions that "a few months ago, I would have considered a pointless exercise with little impact."

Table 2 summarizes our findings from the post-course survey, showing that *all* students who responded to the survey indicated that the course increased their awareness of structural injustice and improved their sense of civic agency either somewhat or significantly. Notably, a majority of students across both cohorts reported *significant* effects of the course on these two features, with 62% of students reporting increased awareness of structural injustice and 57% reporting an improved sense of civic agency. The great majority of students also indicated the course "somewhat" (63%) or "significantly" (32%) encouraged them to be more civically engaged. Moreover, the final response is particularly encouraging: two-thirds of students (67%) indicated that the course

was “very” relevant to them as a citizen of Aotearoa or elsewhere, with the remaining third (32%) reporting that it was “somewhat” relevant to them.

Table 2. Student Responses 18 months (For 2019 Cohort) and 6 Months (For 2020 Cohort) After Completion of Course²⁴

	2019 cohort 29 students	2020 cohort 21 students	Overall 50 students
Have you taken a structural approach to issues or actions more as a result of this course?	Not at all 0 Somewhat 13 A lot 16	Not at all 0 Somewhat 6 A lot 15	0% 38% 62%
Has this course improved your sense of civic agency?	Not at all 0 Somewhat 15 A lot 13	Not at all 0 Somewhat 6 A lot 15	0% 43% 57%
Has this course encouraged you to be more civically engaged?	Not at all 2 Somewhat 18 A lot 8	Not at all 0 Somewhat 13 A lot 8	4% 63% 33%
How relevant or useful has this course been to you as a citizen, whether of Aotearoa or elsewhere?	Not at all 0 Somewhat 11 A lot 17	Not at all 0 Somewhat 5 A lot 16	0% 33% 67%

Despite the passage of time, this course retains relevance and impact for a large number of students. Students shared many ways in which they had “become much more involved in my community as a result of this course” in the months since it finished: volunteering or taking up part-time employment with various community organizations and advocacy groups; becoming involved in climate, nurse, or teacher strikes; door knocking and phone banking during the 2020 general election; changing their consumer choices; attending more protests, making more submissions to local government plans and Select Committees, and writing their local representatives; joining multiple political parties; and, when already politically active prior to taking the course, “using more forms of civic action after the course.”

The Impact of a Structural Approach: Student Testimonies

The quantitative data analysis of students’ final summative reflections and their responses to open-ended questions on the post-course survey shows the clear effects of the course’s structural approach on students’ civic engagement. A thematic analysis of these testimonies enables us to identify some key aspects of the course that students link to their increased sense of agency and action. In this section, we highlight five key ways in which students note the structural approach impacted their thinking and action: (i) offering a vocabulary for understanding sociopolitical structures; (ii) revealing points of weakness or possibilities for intervention in these structures; (iii) expanded notions of what constitutes civic action; (iv) discernment regarding appropriate and effective action; (v) galvanizing action.

i. Vocabulary for understanding sociopolitical structures.

Our students’ sense of agency was clearly developed via the study of structural injustice. This is not intuitive, perhaps—we might presume that a focus on such complex, diffuse, transnational, and entrenched issues would lead students to feel daunted regarding the potential impact of their actions. Certainly, some students did note that they remain daunted, to a great extent. And yet they noted repeatedly that the heuristic of structural injustice was eye-opening and agency-

enhancing, as it gave language and analytic tools to make sense of what until now had remained both opaque and monolithic. We witnessed repeatedly how understanding issues like racism and climate change as complex, dynamic systems produced in students what Coles calls “the Toto effect”—like Dorothy’s dog discovering the real Wizard of Oz behind the curtain, it “unveils systems not as totalities but as assemblages of autocatalytic dynamics amid diverse ecologies of other autocatalytic assemblages.”²⁵ The insight that seemingly intractable structural issues are “the outcome of a multitude of actions by many individuals and groups...made [me] realize how much agency I have...to make change.” This vocabulary was especially valuable in the context of civic action as these students noted:

- I am genuinely grateful for two key learning experiences... The first is a vocabulary for describing this dilemma I’ve been struggling with: the idea of structural injustice. In my mind, having such a vocabulary—a shared language—for discussing the issues we see in the world, is the first step in breaking them down, in challenging the idea that systems are “immutable totalities.” (Coles 2016, 117)
- One of the significant changes in my thinking was around seeing systems as totalities and how this can prevent change from occurring.
- Despite being very passionate about this issue [climate change], I have often felt hopeless when examining it due to its sheer complexity and the lack of government action in response to it. However, the concept of structural injustice has been a revolutionary lens for me to look at climate change and all sorts of other social issues with...because I can now look at issues as a result of a huge number of norms and practices, rather than just as governmental or corporate failings.

ii. Reveals possibilities for intervention

A structural approach also enables students to identify various multiple sites, registers, actors, and forces related to a given issue, and then to trace specific interaction effects between these nodes in the system. Often, when these systems are what Coles calls “autocatalytic,” or self-reinforcing, students can feel overwhelmed—as dynamic as these systems might be, they nonetheless feel insurmountable.²⁶ Yet, by tarrying with the specifics of these nodes and their interactions, we work to highlight how each is a site of potential intervention. As we begin to study forms of action addressing such issues, this understanding is complemented by a growing awareness of the countless, creative ways citizens like them are in fact intervening and creating various forms of change. Many students noted the value of this vocabulary to both identify the issues and act in relation to them:

- I now think of all change as possible, and no longer as some far-fetched reality... we can start to see this world the same as Toto, that the system is not what we think or this big overlying order. The systems are not fixed... With issues such as gender pay gaps, inequality, racism and settler-colonialism, it makes me realize that we can change the way things work, and it comes down to figuring out how these systems work and using that to voice our concerns and to have a say.
- I found Coles’ discussion of complex dynamic systems theory especially empowering and hopeful. Seeing systems as fixed and unchallengeable monoliths was part of why I found resolving my dilemma so difficult.
- A key lesson I have learnt that has given me optimism is that although injustices constrain so many lives, as Coles discusses, structures are dynamic and they are

malleable.

- I... began to realise that people can leverage their power to create institutional change. Realising that all these structural injustices are not malevolent but rather the creation of small normative actions.
- By acquiring a deeper understanding of the contributors to New Zealand's structural injustices, I began to appreciate that the system was constructed. I was able to learn about how that construction took place. And as a result, I began to see that it was similarly vulnerable to deconstruction.

iii. Expanded notions of civic action

Prior to our course, students often, as one student phrased it, “had in... mind that politics was essentially just megaphones in the street or suits in debating chambers.” It is no surprise, then, how often they reflect that this course expanded their sense of what counts as civic action—that theatre and sharing economies, community-building and museum exhibits are also ways citizens around the world are participating in their communities for the purposes of positive transformation. Students reported, for example:

- Prior to this course, I was ambivalent about the extent to which I could participate in politics, beyond more conventional methods such as voting. However, I now have a better understanding of the various forms of civic action, and the fact that I am able to partake in those that I am either more interested in, or better equipped to do so.
- I have hugely developed my understanding of civic action which has transformed the way I view my role in society. Similar to the public, I had a preconceived idea of what civic action is that consists mainly of disruptive, spectacular actions such as mass protests. I have really enjoyed getting a deeper understanding and exposure to a variety of different forms of civic action that are different from what I previously believed.
- One of the biggest surprises for me in this class is that... things I would not have even viewed as political actions [are political, such as] going to plays, engaging with community, experiencing certain aspects of pop culture...

iv. Discernment regarding appropriate forms of action

In delving into these genres of action via context-specific comparative analysis each week, thereby unpacking the particular strengths, conditions, and impacts of each, students develop capacities for discernment regarding appropriate and effective action. As one student noted, after drawing on this knowledge to determine which forms of action to use in designing a campaign for restarting governmental support for the Syria crisis, “I had more confidence to put this into action since I understood the theory behind it and had knowledge of the systems in place.” This was key for students’ sense of agency not only because it opens up and develops discernment regarding a wider suite of civic actions to them, but also because its focus on primarily non-institutional forms of action means that, as one student reflected: “While grand institutional change may seem broad and unachievable, small prefigurative environments can be implemented from the ground up with great success in communities... I was surprised to learn how complex civic action was but I also began to appreciate how my role in the community could [contribute as] civic action, especially when institutions remain resolute against the opinions of an individual.”

v. Increased civic action

Students repeatedly linked an increase in civic activity to their “understandings of injustice... that I learnt in the course,” their “personal growth... in this class,” and “being more informed, asking the big questions, [and] questioning the system as opposed to just the actors.” They also attributed these activities to the course because it “introduced me to ways that I can take part.” Students noted they had been “inspired by this course” to act in these ways because of “the confidence this course gave me”—and this sense of efficacy was consistently attributed to the course’s structural approach to both civic action and issues.

We saw this structural approach galvanize students towards action in a number of ways. First, by giving them a language for collective responsibility. Whereas frames of personal liability can lead to either refusal or paralysis, a structural analysis both diffuses these possible reactions by collectivizing responsibility and motivates students for action by highlighting that these issues are largely the unintentional result of countless acts of everyday citizens, and maintained as long as we fail to act to change them.^{27,28} Repeatedly, students note this course has given them a new sense of their own responsibility in relation to these issues, as well as a future-focused and agentic language of collective responsibility when a previous notion of personal guilt held them captive:

- I came into this course feeling relatively disillusioned with the state of political affairs in New Zealand today... I felt paralysed with the immensity of it all and had found myself retreating... This course has taught me that I need to stop considering my reaction to social issues as an individual action... What was a new concept to me, was that because structural injustice is the outcome of collective action and inaction, a collective response would be required to effectively combat it. As a result, I began looking at my relationships with those around me and considered how as a collective, rather than individuals, we can begin to challenge these oppressive structures.
- The course has changed how I think about colonization. As a Pākehā [non-Indigenous] citizen of New Zealand, I had previously felt either defensive or guilty about my role in decolonisation and fighting racism, however this course taught me how I could take responsibility for my actions and history. The course also made me feel like I had more agency and that I could really make a difference.
- This [course] opened my understanding of the role that I can play in society as an individual. Perhaps it is easy to blame the systems for the structural injustice, but I never realized that I was also part of the problem or to some extent, a contributor to the structural injustice by accepting the rules of the system.

Second, this structural approach to both issues and action provided a further source of perceived agency by reinforcing that, just as no one action can cause the change we seek in its entirety, their own actions are working in—albeit unwitting or inadvertent—concert with countless acts of other citizens over time:

- Each action has its unique set of strengths and weaknesses. Structural injustice cannot be solved by one form of action alone... structural injustices [are] complex, interconnected, and dynamic. It is unsurprising then the solutions to them should be equally as intricate.
- Previously, thinking about injustice left me feeling at a loss... but Coles is right to critique this fixed and detached view of structures as something that entrenches a divide between reform and revolution, and undermines our ability to cultivate “radical democratic power and transformation”²⁹

- Learning that seemingly conflicting forms of action can function harmoniously through a vectorial relationship was a critical experience.
- In such a globalized world with many modes of civic action, we can mobilize ourselves, exercise our agency, and begin to transform these accepted norms and practices.

This means—and we take care to reinforce this using Coles’ own notion of “wormhole hope”—that seemingly ineffective or minor acts can ultimately contribute to broader structural change. As noted above, many students acted on this invigorated sense of their own agency even as the course was unfolding, for the first time making a Select Committee submission, voting in local body elections, attending a protest, or becoming involved in an advocacy campaign, all because, they attested, the course affirmed their own agency. One student, reflecting on her first time volunteering for the Wiki o Te Reo Māori (Māori Language Week) parade in response to our course, invoked Coles’ notion of “*wormhole hope*” to consider the impact of this civic action:

The direct causal consequences might never be known... the school children who I walked with and had conversations with might go on to do activism in relation to Te Reo as a result of our talk, but I will never know. There is something peaceful about that, because it makes me want to go out and be more active in case this plants a seed for another student... Overall, this course has challenged me to consider my own role within society and how I can harness my agency for the better.

In considering the various ways a structural approach shaped our students’ views of and engagement with civic action, we see something exciting and altogether rare: in the face of the most vexing, intractable, and pervasive issues that define contemporary politics, at a time when we have record lows in voter turnout, party membership and other standard markers of political engagement, students expressing themselves to be both equipped and motivated to act to meaningfully change the world around them. We see this course as a rare opportunity to affect what these future leaders consider civic action, and to develop the literacies, skills, and sense of agency required to act effectively beyond the terms that formal politics or the occasional protest provide, in their final year with us before they step into and significantly shape the world beyond the classroom:

- I found this course very life changing as it gave meaning to many of my wonderings as a child who grew up in a small town... [the course] enabled me to understand the role that I assume as a citizen of Aotearoa in the fact that I can partake in civic action as I deem fit. This course made me realise that small actions which at first felt futile can actually contribute to political discourse and even change.
- I have a deeper understanding... [of] the most pressing challenges that our society is currently facing. I can comprehend the factors that produce injustice, and I know what I can do as a citizen to address these issues. This course has surpassed my expectations and reflecting on the knowledge and wisdom I have gained throughout the semester, I feel empowered to utilize my social advantages to help rethink, reshape and rebuild the systems and structures that create structural injustice and allow it to endure.

Both immediately following and months after the course, the overwhelming majority (over 90%) of students demonstrated pronounced increases in their sense of agency and the use of a structural approach to interpret contemporary issues and civic action to address them as results

of this course. They also made continual links between these two impacts, attributing the former to the latter in various ways. In light of these findings, we hold that this structural approach to both civic issues and civic action contributes to students' civic literacy as well as sense of efficacy. It demystifies what can feel monolithic and immutable, revealing multifarious points of potential intervention as well as the contingency of structural conditions on ongoing interactions. At the same time, it provides a wider and more nuanced sense of forms of action available to them and capacities for discernment between them. Finally, it provides a sense of "wormhole hope" borne of a sense that our actions are connected to both countless others that come before us and changes that are to come:

Every revolutionary event (big or small) is itself made possible by an uncanny connection with a previous time that had a similar revolutionary charge or natal intensity... [This] instills in us a more resilient faith that our own exemplary struggles may themselves reemerge beyond vast stretches of defeat to engage in revitalizing improbable futures long after we are gone.³⁰

Challenges and Future Directions

There are, of course, limitations and continual learning ahead in taking this structural approach to civic education. Four in particular stand out to us, in reflecting on our and our students' experiences: the need for better integration with the community, attentiveness to structural issues already present in the classroom, impacts of the global pandemic and online learning, and the need for broader coordination of civic engagement education within our program.

First, in future years we will be focusing our attention on how to be more integrated with politically active communities, so as to give students more opportunities to engage with and contribute to the world outside the classroom. Ideally, we aim for this to take a more structural approach, where student actions are more connected across context and time: in real-time relationship with and guided by local communities, and handed over to the next class for more informed, constellated, and effective actions than "one-off" interventions allow.

Second, we are aware of how the structural issues we study are always-already present in the classroom, most notably in the different social positions of our students and the impacts this has on levels and dynamics of participation. We notice more contributions to class discussion from students who come from more privileged backgrounds, which likely also impact workshop group dynamics. We see structural differences manifest in workshop collaborations, for example when the solitary Indigenous student in a group is looked on as the "representative" voice for Māori. We also contend with the fact that learning about issues like settler-colonialism affects students differently, with some approaching this learning having personally borne the weighty, negative experiences of this structural injustice, while others come to this subject with little recognition of the ways it has offered them protection or enabled their success. This can mean that some learning may come at the expense of others or even put them in harm's way. How we hold the space for radically different positions from which our students come to this joint inquiry is always delicate, complex, and fraught, and we have ongoing questions regarding conditions for safety and discomfort, challenge and advocacy as educators. These questions are, perhaps, more productive as ongoing questions that keep us alert to these ever-present risks—and a structural lens arguably helps to sensitize civic educators to and navigate such concerns and complexities.

Third, it is also worth noting the impact of changing mid-semester to online learning in 2020 due to COVID-19, given the course's focus on collective dialogue, collaboration, and experiential learning. So many of the forms of action that we were studying required being able to physically gather in public, and some of our assessment relied on students seeking field experiences of such actions. We have no doubt this has been a shared challenge among civic educators over this time. Yet the move online also made students more aware of the structural constraints to organizing and preparing for action, and illuminated structural constraints in students' own lives, evidenced in

unequal access to the internet, mental health support, and domestic safety. We certainly noticed less engagement with the course than the previous year as students negotiated multiple challenges introduced by this pandemic. Yet, this course was also uniquely positioned to respond to some of the challenges. Students reported feeling a sense of community that was otherwise lacking in their university experiences as a result of the group work and weekly class gathering for the online workshop. Students also reported feeling more urgency to act in the face of structure; though they were overwhelmed in some respects, the pandemic's immense disruption to daily life and witnessing dramatic structural changes by responding governments had the "Toto effect" of exposing the "normal rules and accepted practices" of our society, the exploitation and struggles they cause—for example, of underpaid and vulnerable "essential workers"—and the malleability of these rules, all of which had previously been naturalized and largely invisible.³¹ While the pandemic thus forced us to think creatively and perhaps find limits on civic action in the absence of capacities to gather in person, it also provided unexpected resources for sensing agency and possibility in response to structural injustice. As this student noted:

It seemed fateful that this course occurred at a time when the world is experiencing unprecedented circumstances, coupled with global protests and actions against injustice. During this time I have been able to put into practice some of the key learnings of the course, and I have already found myself engaging more actively in politics, and considering the modes of action available to me. In all, while elements of this class have left me feeling hopeless at times, I have found POLS353 extraordinarily helpful, using what I have learnt to go forth and educate myself and others, and express my own civic agency in the political world.

Finally, there are also limits placed on this course in the absence of complementarity and coordination with the broader political science program and institution. Both the structural injustice and civic education scholarship emphasize the importance of multiple sites of experience so as to support learning and change. As McCartney, Rimmerman, McHugh and Mayer, and Coles all agree, "no one course or activity can create a democratically engaged citizen."³² Students come to this sole course in their third and final year, and it remains the only one in our program that centers the student as a civic actor. Students note that they feel a sense of loss for not having had more opportunities for such thinking earlier in their degree, and we recognize the limited impact of this course given its institutional setting. We hope to leverage the demonstrable impacts of this course on students' sense of agency and responsibility to develop through lines to other courses so that the benefits we see can be deepened and strengthened over the three years we have with these civic actors. This will also enable students' grasp of these wholly new and complex suites of concepts and analytic tools to become more nuanced. Within the 12-week confines of the course, at present this remains more of a survey course, and by the time we finish the course we feel we have only just begun. We look forward to finding modifications that allow us to introduce further nuance in these regards, and developing capacities and sensibilities in further courses so that this course does not seek to carry so much.

By directing our collective attention to those challenges and directions that feel most connected to this diminished sense of civic agency today we have, in this course, sought to respond to the despair, anxiety and uncertainty that feel chronic for our students at this time. We aimed to foster civic efficacy via the development of literacies, skills, and sensibilities necessary for citizens to constructively and reflectively participate in their communities. Yet, because we centered structural injustice and non-institutional forms of action, students developed literacies and skills that are distinct from other civic engagement courses. Their learning entailed, among other things, practical knowledge regarding a repertoire of non-institutional forms of civic action—not simply a vocabulary of genres, but a sense of their respective strengths, conditions, theories of change, and potential impacts—as well as a structural sense of how these different forms of action are interact-

ing across a complex field to produce meaningful change. This picture of both issue and action is admittedly complex—and that, in itself, can prove daunting. Yet, we have seen what a structural, non-institutional approach to civic engagement education can do to grow this sense of agency among our students that is at once most scarce and vital.

Endnotes

1. The indigenous name Aotearoa, or sometimes Aotearoa New Zealand, is increasingly being used to refer to the country. Throughout the chapter we use both versions interchangeably.
2. Adam Fowler, “Civic Agency,” in *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, eds. Helmut K. Anheier, Stefan Toepler and Regina List (New York: Springer, 2010).
3. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963); Robert Dudley and Alan Gitelson, “Civic Education, Civic Engagement, and Youth Civic Development,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 36, no. 2 (2003): 263–67; Renée Bukovchik Van Vechten and Anita Chadha, “How Students Talk to Each Other: An Academic Social Networking Project,” in *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, eds. Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson (Washington DC: American Political Science Association, 2013).
4. McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013, 5.
5. McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013, 5; Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, “Educating the ‘Good’ Citizen: Political Choices and Pedagogical Tools,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37, no. 2 (2004): 241–47; Alison Rios Millett McCartney, “Teaching Civic Engagement: Debates, Definitions, Benefits, and Challenges,” in *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, eds. Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson, 9–20 (Washington DC: American Political Science Association, 2013).
6. This research was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee [#28622].
7. See ‘Our Civic Future’, <https://nzpsa.com/resources/Documents/Our%20Civic%20Future.pdf>.
8. For example, see ‘New civics resources for young New Zealanders’, <https://gazette.education.govt.nz/articles/new-civics-resources-for-young-new-zealanders/>; ‘Our Civic Future’, <https://nzpsa.com/resources/Documents/Our%20Civic%20Future.pdf>; Make It 16, <https://makeit16.org.nz>.
9. For more information about the course, please see the course outline available on the companion website.
10. McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013; Michael K. McDonald, “Internships, Service-Learning, and Study Abroad: Helping Students Integrate Civic Engagement Learning across Multiple Experiences,” in *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, eds. Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson, 369–83 (Washington DC: American Political Science Association, 2013).
11. Brian M. Harward and Daniel M. Shea, “Higher Education and the Multiple Modes of Engagement,” in *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, eds. Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson, 21–40 (Washington DC: American Political Science Association, 2013); Elizabeth Beaumont, “Political Learning and Democratic Capacities: Some Challenges and Evidence of Promising Approaches,” in *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, eds. Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson, 41–55 (Washington DC: American Political Science Association, 2013).
12. Many students commented on these pedagogical features of the course, for example noting that: “I found the course’s constant emphasis on personal development and personal experience very enriching for my learning. Every topic that we delved into demanded of us personal anecdotes, opinions and experience in order for the material to truly flourish, this in turn has solidified my learning at every week and allowed for a constant standard of analysis of the topics in the way they play out in my own political engagement and activities.”
13. Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
14. Young 2011, 63.
15. *Ibid.*, 154–55.
16. See, for example, Tim Verceletti and Elizabeth Matto, “The Kitchen-Table Connection: The Effects of Political Discussion on Youth Knowledge and Efficacy,” CIRCLE Working Paper #72, 2010; Carole Pateman, “Political Culture, Political Structure and Political Change,” *British Journal of Political Science* 1, no. 3 (1971): 298.
17. See, for example, J. Cherie Strachan and Elizabeth Bennion, “New Resources for Civic Engagement: The National Survey of Student Leaders, Campus Associational Life, and the Consortium for Inter-Campus SoTL Research,” in *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*, eds. Elizabeth C. Matto, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson 291–307 (Washington DC: American Political Science Association, 2017).

18. Young 2011, 69.
19. Richard P. Adler and Judy Goggin, "What Do We Mean by 'Civic Engagement'?" *Journal of Transformative Education* 3, no. 3 (2005): 236–253; McCartney 2013.
20. Romand Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 148.
21. Marshall Ganz, "Why David Sometimes Wins: Strategic Capacity in Social Movements," in *The Psychology of Leadership: New Perspectives and Research*, 209–238 (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2005).
22. Benjamin Franks, "The Direct Action Ethic From 59 Upwards," *Anarchist Studies* 11 (2003): 13–41.
23. Our questions were: What stands out to you, from the term, regarding key learning experiences? What impact have these had on how you think about and/or practice citizenship and civic action, and why? What are key lessons and questions that you take with you, and what do you want to do with them going forward?
24. For the 2019 cohort, 29 students responded out of a possible 57 (51%). For the 2020 cohort, 21 students responded out of possible 60 (35%).
25. Coles 2016, 147.
26. Ibid.
27. Avril Bell, "'Cultural Vandalism' and Pākehā Politics of Guilt and Responsibility," In *Tangata Tangata: The Changing Ethnic Contours of New Zealand*, eds. Paul Spoonley, David G. Pearson, and Cluny Macpherson (Southbank, Victoria: Thomson Press, 2004), 89–107.
28. Young 2011.
29. Coles 2016, 117.
30. Coles 2016: 185–7.
31. Young 2011, 48.
32. McCartney 2013, 19; Craig Rimmerman, "Service-Learning Lessons," in *Service-Learning in the Liberal Arts: How and Why It Works*, ed. Craig A. Rimmerman 187–190 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Publishers, 2011); Mary McHugh and Russell Mayer, "The Different Types of Experiential Learning Offered in a Political Science Department: A Comparison of Four Courses," in *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, eds. Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson, 353–67 (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 2013); Coles 2016.