Expanding Our Understanding of Social Change

A Report From the Definition Task Force of the HLC Special Emphasis Project

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Social change is defined broadly in terms of process and product to indicate that all kinds of social change activity are welcomed and encouraged at Walden. As faculty members, students, and alumni have indicated, even small acts can have large consequences, and many of these consequences are unpredictable. The charge given to the Definition Task Force was to expand the university’s definition of social change to provide more guidance for teaching, learning, and assessing the social change mission at Walden. To that end, the Task Force offers the following considerations.

To bring about long-term solutions and promote lasting effects through the process of social change, the following features may need to be considered as appropriate to the context and purposes of each program. The features are grouped under the headings Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes, to encourage a holistic approach to preparing learners for social change. The groupings, however, are defined by soft boundaries because each feature belongs primarily to one group but may share some of the qualities of the other groups.

A. Knowledge

1. Scholarship
   The scholar-practitioner model is particularly suited to social change because knowledge applied to real-life situations is a scholar-practitioner’s goal. In the scholarly role, the scholar-practitioner engages in active learning, critical reflection, and inquiry into real-life dilemmas and possibilities. Careful study and research can reveal the causes and correlates of social problems and suggest solutions and opportunities for promoting growth.

2. Systems thinking

   Many of the issues addressed by social change are complex because there may be multiple causes and manifestations of the issue that require different responses at many levels. Systemic thinking is a technique for developing insights into challenging situations and complex subjects. It usually begins with analysis, which makes sense of a system by breaking it apart to see how the parts work together and influence each other. This may be followed by synthesis that aims to develop a set of responses that address the situation in a comprehensive way. In the Walden community, finding systemic solutions to challenging issues might be undertaken by multidisciplinary collaborations in which scholar-practitioners from a number of colleges work together to examine issues and propose multipronged responses.
3. Reflection

Those working toward positive social change can enhance their effectiveness by reflecting on the experience. Reflection can be extrospective, that is, looking outward to review the short- and long-term outcomes of a project and its implications for the individuals, institutions, and communities with and for whom one is working. It can also be introspective, that is, looking inward to examine what has been learned from the process, including new insights into one’s motives, skills, knowledge, actions, and reactions. Self-reflection allows for the contemplation of one’s professional and personal development. Group reflection affords all stakeholders in a social change project (scholar-practitioners, community partners, policy-makers, and beneficiaries) an opportunity to process the experience and learn from each other. Reflection employs critical-thinking and analytical skills. It can be carried forward by questioning and self-inquiry and may depend on a willingness to see things from another’s perspective. While reflection needs to be honest, it should also be caring and supportive, examining strengths as well as weaknesses and successes as along with disappointments. While reflection may look to the past, its purpose is forward-looking—to make future social change activities more effective.

B. Skills

4. Practice

In the practitioner role, the scholar-practitioner engages in the application of knowledge. Learning-by-doing, or experiential learning, has a long history of support and success in education because it can infuse and sometimes lead to deconstructing or constructing theoretical understandings within the realities of practical life in the student’s personal growth, profession, or community. By using recursive loops between scholarship and practice, both intellectual growth and better practice can occur—each informing the other. Not merely knowing about theories but actually testing theories in the context of everyday life is the foundation of a scholar-practitioner’s educational process and contribution to social change.

5. Collaboration

Given the complexity of many of the issues addressed in social change efforts, responsive action may be needed from many different sources. In these situations, the
social change agent may want to build working relationships with other entities including community leaders, service agencies, neighborhood coalitions, businesses, religious congregations, and other local institutions. Apart from these types of civic engagement, collaboration with scholars and practitioners in an array of professional fields may bring a variety of perspectives, research, and applied knowledge. Partnerships can unite the skills, knowledge, and energies needed to make a difference. The ability to build a team, combined with leadership, project management, conflict resolution, and communication skills, may be essential. A significant partner in social change enterprises is the primary beneficiary; this person has a personal knowledge and experience that can be invaluable in both analyzing a situation and proposing responses. The primary beneficiary may be one individual or someone representing the perspectives of a group of beneficiaries. Working collaboratively with primary beneficiaries can be mutually educative and rewarding.

6. Advocacy

Advocacy is a matter of raising consciousness or being the “voice” for someone, some group, or something that may or may not otherwise have a voice that can be heard. It may involve political engagement, but it may also be a matter of supporting others as they negotiate directly with the services and opportunities they need. In light of social change, advocacy more widely aims to influence not only political but also economic and social systems and institutions to protect and promote the dignity, health, safety, and rights of people. Advocacy for an issue often takes the form of education that aims to bring about a new understanding and awareness. Advocacy may also need to encompass mentoring activities to build confidence and self-reliance in those whose welfare is being promoted.

7. Civic engagement

Social change efforts can be supported and reflected in laws by policy-makers. Being aware of the channels for communicating with civic leaders and knowing how to effectively use those channels are often important when working for social change. All institutions and groups—not just government entities—have their own politics, that is, a prevailing mind-set, an internal structure, and channels of influence and power. Being able to incorporate and negotiate these politics in support of social change requires finesse and sensitivity. Understanding this before engaging with others can be helpful, whether these others are legislators, local agencies and institutions, professional associations, neighborhoods, ad hoc teams, or professional colleagues. Power
relationships also exist between those working for social change and those who are the primary beneficiaries. Mutual collaboration and power-sharing between the parties involved can empower all toward more lasting social change.

C. Attitudes

8. Humane ethics

While a number of emotional effects may prompt one to engage in social change, including empathy, sympathy, guilt, a feeling of satisfaction, and so on, one’s ethical code can inform and direct one’s motivated engagement in social change. Humane ethics is a system of moral principles that guide human conduct with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions. While personal codes of ethics may differ, an underlying, common code of a humane ethic is characterized by tenderness, compassion, sympathy for people and animals, especially for the suffering or distressed, and concern for the health of the environment in which we live.

Analyzing Social Change

Figure 1 below shows each of the features—scholarship, systemic thinking, reflection, practice, collaboration, advocacy, civic engagement, and humane ethics—on an axis ranging from 0 to 5. Each social change activity or project could be mapped onto the axes to show the extent to which it incorporates each feature. Joining the points along each axis produces a web for each activity, an example of which is shown in red.

It is important to note that this tool is not intended to be an instrument to assess a particular social change activity. Some projects and activities will be appropriately strong in one or more areas but not necessarily in all. Rather, its purpose is to serve as a tool to analyze social change activities that occur at Walden. It may reveal areas where an activity might be enhanced, and importantly, it may reveal where the program for preparing students for social change might be strengthened.

Further, all kinds of social change activities are encouraged, given the range of interests, commitments, and opportunities for engagement among students, faculty members, and staff. Most, if not all, kinds of activity can be represented as a web. The purpose of the web analysis is ultimately to provide a tool to enlarge our vision of the range and features of social change that seeks long-term solutions and promotes lasting effects.
Figure 1. Web map showing each of the features.

Below are some examples of web maps of social change activities based on reports by students, faculty members, and alumni in a recent research study: *Perspectives on Social Change*. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Example No. 1. Bookcase Builders

Tom is a Rotarian and undertakes a number of service projects in the community with other Rotarians. One such activity involves building bookcases. Some members of the club also volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, which provides housing for needy families. Another member has connections with the local school district and knew of a recent drive to improve the level of literacy in the community. Putting these together, the club decided to build bookcases for the Habitat for Humanity homes and, through the support of another club member who manages a bookstore, give each family a gift certificate to buy books for the children to put in the bookcase.

This activity would certainly rate relatively high on *Collaboration* for the networking among Rotarians, the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity, the school district, and the local book store. It also represents a *Humane Ethic* in that it shows the responsiveness of this club to the need for these children to read
well for their future success in life. As a practice, this need is supported by implicit knowledge about the importance of motivating children and providing them with opportunities to read, so there should be a showing on the Practitioner axis. Figure 2 below shows how this project might be mapped.

![Diagram showing the project mapping on the Practitioner axis.]

*Figure 2. Web map of the bookcase builders project.*

If Tom and his fellow club members want to pursue this project further they might ask whether they may seek other possible partners for this endeavor, such as the reading tutors, the bookstore salespeople, the parents, and even the children themselves. Others brought into the program may contribute more Systemic Thinking to address the problem of illiteracy. The club members may also consider follow-up activities using other features like Advocacy with a particular focus on mentoring, Civic Engagement, or some Scholarly study of or research on the effectiveness of the project.

Example No. 2. Basket-Weavers as Story-Tellers

Arsi’s research took her to a remote and needy area of Jamaica, where many of the village women help support their families through weaving baskets for sale in the tourist areas. Using a qualitative approach, Arsi listened to and recorded the women’s stories of their lives in abject poverty, analyzed them for common themes, and presented her findings as her dissertation. The information in this dissertation could be invaluable to service agencies and others willing to work with these women to improve their lives.
The project is high on the Scholar axis, especially because it is research into a real-life problem that needs informed solutions. It further exhibits significant Collaboration in that she established personal relationships with the women so that they could tell her their stories. It is also strong in the Humane Ethics dimension because it deals with real human need. Writing a dissertation also demands Reflection, particularly because it requires some discussion of the meaning of the findings and their possible implications. The dissertation ultimately enters the public domain and, as such, is a permanent voice for the women whose stories it shares (Advocacy). Figure 3 below illustrates this example.

Figure 3. Web map of the basket-weavers as story-tellers project.

Arsi successfully graduated in 2011. If she wanted to continue with the project, she might share her findings with policy-makers (Civic Engagement) and service providers, such as business people, educators, and healthcare workers (Systemic Thinking). If she could disseminate her work through publications and presentations, she would not only deepen her own understanding (Reflection) but more directly provide valuable information to service agencies and others to apply in working with and for these women (Practitioner).

Example No. 3. The Monthly Giver
Many faculty members, students, and staff members sign up to make monthly donations to agencies, such as United Way, through automatic payroll deductions. Given their busy schedules and commitments, they look at this as making some kind of contribution to “the development of individuals, institutions, and societies.” Does such an activity count as social change? Figure 4 below is an attempt to map this activity.

One of the benefits of the mapping tool is that it is inclusive of a wide range of possible engagements in social change. The monthly giver, like many others, is guided by a Humane Ethic and wants to act out of compassion and care for the distressed and needy. She also understands that the organization she is donating to is carefully managed, well informed, and handles donations responsibly, and she wants to do something practical to support it (Practitioner). She also knows that her donation, because it is combined with the donations of many others, can amount to a significant sum to support large-scale projects in the community (Collaboration).

Figure 4. Web map of the monthly giver.

Example No. 4. Global Day of Service Participant
During the annual Global Day of Service, Justin organized a small group of his co-workers to clean up the road entrance to the town. This meant gaining permission from the town clerk, recruiting willing workers, arranging for safety training, and equipping them with safety vests, gloves, and garbage bags. Justin works full-time and is undertaking his studies part-time. He is also the father of three, and his wife works full-time so he has a heavy load of responsibilities. He does not have a lot of spare time, but he has committed the time to organize and prepare for this 1-day volunteer clean-up event.

Justin’s efforts are guided by an ethic of care for the environment (Humane Ethics) and are one means through which he can apply his studies on the importance of protecting the eco-system in a practical way (Practitioner). Partnering with the town clerk was mandatory in this case, but the Collaboration was important for the safety of his team, and his recruiting efforts among his co-workers was an extension of the Collaboration. In some senses, he served as an Advocate for the environment. The day following this activity, he posted some thoughts on what the experience meant to him and his co-workers in a class discussion forum (Reflection).

Figure 5. Web map of a Global Day of Service participant’s activity.

Example No. 5. Nurses for Women
Claire is a member of a nurse’s organization working for an urban community offering uncompensated services to more than 200,000 clients a year. One of her projects has involved hiring a number of nurses who are certified to perform sexual assault examinations; this expedites forensic examinations in pre-hospital agencies, such as emergency medical services and fire departments. As a result, law enforcement can work with the victims of domestic violence, abuse, or sexual assault on the spot and spare them the added trauma of going to an emergency room. The program has seen a record number of perpetrators put behind bars—but the work does not stop there. The organization helps the young women get back on their feet in a number of ways, including connecting them with “Suits for Success” so they are dressed suitably for job interviews, teaching them interview skills, getting them enrolled in school programs, and helping them with grants and jobs, so that they can put what happened to them as victims behind them.

Claire has multiplied her individual efforts with an eye toward lasting change in a number of ways. She and her co-volunteers apply a systemic approach to addressing the needs of the victims of sexual abuse: helping them gain the confidence, skills, opportunities, financial support, and even the clothing to be successful in the job market so they can build success in their lives (Systemic Thinking). She has increased her personal effectiveness by connecting with other trained and certified nurses and with fire departments and emergency medical services (Collaboration). She seems to have been moved to action by a Humane Ethic and has found a way to use her skills and knowledge to help others (Practitioner).
This is only a small sample of social change projects, but if it is representative, it is possible to discern some trends in social change activity at Walden. For instance, in the aggregate, Humane Ethics and Collaboration are strong features but Civic Engagement and Systemic Thinking are not. Such findings may be useful in determining whether all of the identified features should be supported and, if so, how they can be supported in the curriculum and through guidance offered by university leadership and students’ mentors.