Social Action in Practice 2026: Module Handbook

Students meet with Rebecca Pow MP as they get their statutory instrument on plastics pollution endorsed by the Environmental Audit Committee. 2018 Cohort

Students help run CivicUEA community events. Two end up doing consultancy work using similar methods across East Anglia. 2022 Cohort

Students partner with River Action to run a stunt on the River Wensum dressed as a fish covered in poo… 2024 Cohort

Students march for justice for Grenfell in Kensington and help preserve the memorials there (as well as helping Generation Rent win a national campaign on renters rights). 2019 Cohort

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26.2

Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand.

Xun Kuang, 312–230 BCE: Confucian philosopher, modern interpretation

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

Frederick Douglass 1818-1895: American Abolitionist

Module convener: Dr Ben Little
                                  b.little@uea.ac.uk

Officer hours: Flexible on request – if you ask, I will meet with you at our earliest mutual convenience

Timetabled slots: Fridays - 9.15-11 Queens 0.09; 1-3 CAP 1.17

Introduction to the Module

This module asks you to attempt to change a rule, regulation, norm, or practice of an institution, whether on campus or in the community. You will carry out a campaign on an issue: either one you have chosen yourself, from someone else in the group, started by a previous studemt or as suggested by a community or campaigning organisation. In future years, students will be able to continue campaigns that you start this year too.

The whole thing should be a very different experience to other modules. This isn't about becoming expert on a subject by reading about it, it is about taking an issue you care about and bringing your experience, passion and existing knowledge to do something about it.

There are readings, and you do need to understand what campaigning and social action is about, but that is less important (for the first 10 weeks of the module at least), than effective group work, targeted research, building support and learning to think both strategically and tactically. You will think about how power works, learn how to act powerfully, think about leadership, collaboration, partnerships and networking, how to find and use leverage (within very clear ethical limits).

You will think about the wider architectures of change – systems, cultures, policies, elections, legislative processes – and work out how to intervene in them effectively and about the moral and ethical frameworks that they operate withing. In short, you will not just learn about or even how to be, but will become active democratic citizens: powerful, yet everyday, leaders able to change the world around you in ways that improve your experience of life and the lives of those around you.

The Scott Myers-Lipton Model

"On your marks, GO! Get set… "

For around the same length of time that I've been running modules of this sort (18 years for me now), Professor Scott Myers-Lipton (SML) of San Jose State University has been doing very similar teaching in California. He has turned his experience into a model that can taught at universities all over the world. We both faced the same problems in doing this sort of teaching – problems we will explore throughout the module – and while my solutions worked fine, his are more adaptable to new contexts. This matters for you because by following Scott's model we will have access to a community of students, lecturers, activists and community organisers from across the world. You may not see that day-to-day in the running of the module, but it's there in the background on teachingsocialaction.org and when we go to the spring summit to meet other students doing similar work you will learn from and be inspired by the work of around 30 other classes of students doing something very similar to what we're doing here. You can see those classes, look at their reading lists and as the semester progresses look at their campaigns here: https://teachingsocialaction.org/courses

Change! A Student Guide to Social Action

The other advantage of following the SML model is that we now have a textbook. It's short, digestible, easy to read and at time inappropriately tailored to the US context! We wont be doing the exercises, but they are useful to read to trigger thinking and some of the theory is presented in a way more common in the US. Colleagues are gently talking about an international edition, so your thoughts on what this would look like to make it more relevant to you are much appreciated. It's a great book though which will give you a strong foundation as we work we through the module. Hopefully you've all had a chance to read.

Choosing your campaign

We will go through a process called issue development where we will generate a lot of ideas of things you can campaign on. The key moment for this will be in week 2. In that class we will run a process called Open Space to surface all the ideas you collectively have for campaigns you could run. In that process you will discuss them in detail (not all of you discussing all of them – you'll see how it works), and create an outline for each. The following week – 3 – we will negotiate groups based on your preferences.

Now this year there is an exciting option which some or all of you can do. When we meet for the first time we will discuss if and how many of you want to do it. It will be working with a campaign to establish an affordable eco city in Suffolk – just down the road – for a million people. You can read all about it here: forestcity.uk

If some or even all of you want to work on that, we will restructure the module accordingly.

Groups

You will work in groups with a minimum of 3 people, and no maximum. If your group isn't working or you want to change campaigns or someone drops out to take you below three, talk to me. In fact talk to me at any time – particularly about group work if you're worried.

We'll be thinking about groupwork the whole way through. It's the single most important element of making this whole experience work. It's also the most important thing you can learn from the module (or university?) - transferable to almost any future context. We will think about roles, process and attitudes

The Binders System

We have what we call the "binders system" following the SML model. This means that each time a Social Action module runs at UEA, students will be able to look through binders of previous students work and, if the students who ran the original campaign have agreed to allow it to continue, pick up where other students left off. This is important because it means you can work on campaigns that might not be possible to win in a single semester. When my students at Middlesex helped Intern Aware win a campaign to ensure minimum wage legislation was enforced for internships, that took two years with two different cohorts of students. When Scott's students successfully raised the minimum wage in San Jose County through a referendum, that took four years and lead to a rise across the whole of California.

Part of your assessment will be to produce this Binder whether you want the campaign to continue or not. More detail is in the assessment section below.

The Rules – Ethics and Otherwise

As we will be doing actual campaigns there are a number of recommendations, restrictions and provisos in place. This is to make sure we protect you, me and anyone who might be involved.

Rules:
1. The campaigns must be completely non-violent in deed and in word. This is self-explanatory, but it means we do not harass, harangue or verbally attack targets (I would hope physically goes without saying!). We approach them in their roles and do not use publicly available information to target them as private individuals.
2. Your campaign actions must be legal. We won't rule out confrontational activities – such as marches, demonstrations etc – but where we do them, we do it with permission and forewarning.
3. Your campaigns must align with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
4. Your campaigns must address at least one of the UN Sustainable Development goals.
5. Where an activity is research rather than campaigning, you must have ethics permission. Limited blanket permissions are already in place (see appendix one for letter to send to role holders for initial research conversations)
6. Activities must be SAFE – anything beyond meeting and talking to people will need at least a basic risk assessment

Strong advice from Ben:
7. Show up – you need to be in class to do the module, you need to be at the actions for them to happen. If you can't show up, let someone know and why. Ghosting the module will mess up everyone else and make it much harder to get through it.
8. Do the things you say you will, tell people when things come up and you can't do something. I'm a sucker for this- I take too much on and then I feel guilty and clam up. Don't be me – communicate early and often if you're over committed.
9. Meet agreed deadlines. These aren't for fun – normally an activity will be dependent on another task being completed, if you fall behind things can spiral. See communication above!

Past student additions – the three pillars:
10. Respect – We must respect everyone in the space. Treat everyone with kindness, don't dismiss other's ideas, avoid personal disagreements as they can be dealt with academically and professionally, and respect boundaries.
11. Communication – We will keep a constant stream of communication. Updating our group regularly, being sure to employ honesty, sharing issues and soon as they arise and should anyone have a problem – giving them space to talk. Starting each session with everyone checking in, in whatever format.

12. Engagement – We will all engage with the module. Attending all sessions unless a genuine reason arises, being proactive with work, putting in our full effort and ensuring everyone is working as hard as one another. Do what is expected of you.

Average Day Structure

Things will change on a weekly basis, but my overall thinking is that we will use the time we have as follows:

9.15 – 11: Content and a whole group activity of some kind
11-1: Independent time for you to prepare for 1 O'Clock, do things on campus or work in your group. Some may also have other classes in this time.
1-3: Supervised group work time

Reading

There are two key books to read. The first is the SML text book *Change!* The second is Chris Rose's *How To Win Campaigns*. Both are available through the Talis reading list for the module. *Change!* is short and an easy read. Just read the whole thing quickly if you haven't already.

For certain weeks I may suggest additional readings – I will respond to what's happening in class. You may also suggest reading for the class which I can circulate.

In general, this reading will be assumed rather than a focus in the classroom, but in a dynamic environment if there are gaps in your knowledge or ideas that will help you succeed, not having done useful reading will make everything much harder for you.

There will be additional reading tied to assessment towards the end of the module. This will help you make sense of the experiences you have had. I don't think it's particularly useful to read this in advance.

Campaign Strategy Template

If you choose to do your own campaign (rather than work with Forest City) you will need to complete a form to this template for me to agree. Scott Myers-Lipton can also be sent this by you if you want additional support and feedback.

Campaign issue: (30 words)

Campaign context and background: (200 words)

Campaign Demands:

Demand 1: (30 words max)

Demand 2: (30 words max)

Demand 3: (30 words max)

Campaign Target:
Role:
Responsibilities:
Name(s):

Statement of alignment with Universal Declaration of Human Rights: (max 100 words)

Linked Sustainable Development Goals: (simple list)

Provisional Schedule

Date	Theme	Activities	Reading
Phase 1: Research and Planning			
30th Jan 2026	Introduction: Getting to know each other. What is Activist Campaigning. Introducing the Binders system	Community conversations: introduction to relational presencing; What is campaigning	*Change!* Scott Myers-Lipton
6th Feb 2026	Choosing your campaigns	Open Space	Saul Alinsky *Rules for Radicals* – Chapter 1 "The Struggle"
13^h Feb 2026	Effective group work	Group formation. Issue finalisation.	Beautiful trouble – Choose five articles to share with others. Tyranny of Structurelessness
20th Feb 2026	Reading Week		
27th Feb 2026	Getting out there	Building an identity; developing your campaign "RAP"	*How to Win Campaigns*: First half
6th March 2026	Presentations on plans (rooms TBC)	Campaign planning + content TBD	*How to win Campaigns*: Second Half

Phase 2: Doing The Campaign			
13th March 2026	Campaigning planning		TBD
21st March 2026	Campaign planning/in progress		TBD
Easter 23rd March to 17th April 2025			
24th April 2026	Campaign Activity		TBD
1st May 2026	Campaign "Capstone" event		TBD
Phase 3: Reflection and Assessment			
8th May 2026	Assessment lecture/Follo up		Webster, N. and Stewart, T. (2011), Cornish, F et al (2023) Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2010) And more in reading section
15th May 2026	Reflection lecture		

Assessment

Notes on Assessment

Assessment is the least important part of this process for the first two phases. Being successful in the module requires you to immerse yourself in the process for the first two phases. The key thing to do is keep good records. By this I mean notes, meeting minutes, photographs, research findings and evidence (even for minor things like a phone call) and whatever else is relevant. There are no set rules here, the assessment is about you expressing what you think you learned from the process and that will, necessarily, be individual to your experience.

Assessment outline and criteria

Written assessment comprising 100% of grade

Deadline   End May 2025 TBD

Written reflection of 3000 words. In addition a digital portfolio and physical binder must be submitted collectively by each campaign group.

Components (weighting is rough and the submission will be assessed as a whole):

1. Critical essay reflection on campaign process. (2000 words) – 70%
2. Statement of contribution to Portfolio (500 words)- 20%
3. Letter to future students to accompany your binder (500 words) – 10%

More details of each component will be explained in future weeks.

Assessment criteria:

1. Presentation and clarity: Your work will be well presented and written in a clear manner with Harvard style referencing where appropriate;
2. Research and campaign topic: You must demonstrate understanding of both the organization you have partnered with and the specific issue dealt with in the campaign;
3. Campaigning knowledge: You will demonstrate an awareness of different approaches to campaigning and social change and make reference to them in your analysis of this project;
4. Communication and persuasion: You will demonstrate that thought and theoretical/scholarly insight into how the campaign strategy addressed challenges in communication to, and persuasion of, the people it is targeting;
5. Group work: You will show a clear understanding of the dynamics of group work, the particularities of you group and your specific role within it;

6. Learning process: You should reflect on what and how you have learned throughout the project and use relevant literature to guide you in discussion of this process.

The above criteria will met across all written elements using the portfolio as evidence. Submissions may demonstrate the criteria through all components, but the components will be read together – so if one criterion is met exceptionally in one element but minimally in another, credit will be given for meeting the criteria exceptionally. This excludes criteria 1: presentation and clarity which must be consistent throughout.

Some suggested reading for assessment.

The following are just to get you started – you should be drawing on your knowledge from your degree and using the library and google scholar to supplement the suggestions here. There is some overlap with the online reading list also. This list is provisional – not conclusive – it is indicative of the sorts of things you could read.

The work of Jeffrey Juris is also a really good place to explore what we've been doing on the module: http://www.jeffreyjuris.com/research/militant-ethnography-political-engagement-and-social-movements-research

Campaigning reading

Van der Zee, B. and van der Zee, B. (2010) The protestor's handbook. London: Guardian.

Boyd, A. and Mitchell, D. O. (2012) Beautiful trouble: a toolbox for revolution. New York: OR Books. Available at:
http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uea/detail.action?docID=4535982.

Alinsky, S. D. (1989) Rules for radicals: a practical primer for realistic radicals. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books. Available at:
http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=717755.

Rose, C. (2010) How to win campaigns: communications for change. 2nd ed. London: Earthscan.

Simon, R. (2015) Gramsci's political thought: an introduction. Third edition. London: Lawrence & Wishart

Myers-Lipton, S. (2022) *Change! A Student Guide to Social Action* Abingdon: Routledge

Freeman, J. (1970) The Tyranny of Stuctureless. Available at:
http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm.

Pedagogy + Critical reflection reading

Freire, P., Freire, A. M. A. and Macedo, D. (2000) '"Pedagogy of the Oppressed" [in] The Paulo Freire reader', in The Paulo Freire reader. New York: Continuum.

Illich, I. (1970) Deschooling Society. Illich, Ivan. Marion Boyars (Harper torchbooks: TB 2086). Available at:
https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07845a&AN=uea.792686545&authtype=sso&custid=s8993828&site=eds-live&scope=site

hooks, bell (2003) Teaching community : a pedagogy of hope /. Routledge. Available at:
https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07845a&AN=uea.846494699&authtype=sso&custid=s8993828&site=eds-live&scope=site

hooks, bell (1994) *Teaching to Transgress : education as the practice of freedom* /. Routledge. Available at: https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07845a&AN=uea.877868009&authtype=sso&custid=s8993828&site=eds-live&scope=site

hooks, bell, (2003). *Teaching Community : a Pedagogy of Hope*. New York :Routledge,

Webster, N. and Stewart, T. (2011) Problematizing Service-learning : Critical Reflections for Development and Action. Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing. Available at: https://search-ebscohost-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=470139&site=ehost-live

Kronick, R. F., Cunningham, R. and Gourley, M. (2011) Experiencing Service-Learning. Knoxville: Univ Tennessee Press (Torchbearer Texts). Available at: https://search-ebscohost-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=375820&site=ehost-live

Udvarhelyi, É. T. (2020) 'Participatory action research as political education', Action Learning: Research & Practice, 17(1), pp. 24–33. doi: 10.1080/14767333.2020.1712839

Cornish, F., Breton, N., Moreno-Tabarez, U. *et al.* Participatory action research. *Nat Rev Methods Primers* **3**, 34 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-023-00214-1

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2010). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589

Social Movement readings

Gamson, W. (1991). 'Commitment and Agency in Social Movements.' *Sociological Forum*, 6(1), 27-50. Retrieved March 20, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/684380

Melucci, A. (1985). 'The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements.' *Social Research*, 52(4), 789-816. Retrieved March 20, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/40970398

Polletta, F. (2002) 'Freedom Is an Endless Meeting : Democracy in American Social Movements.' Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Available at: https://search-ebscohost-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=518379&site=ehost-live

(not really social movement studies but will put this here too:
Jeremy Gilbert (2008) *Anticapitalism and Culture: Radical Theory and Popular Politics* London: Routledge available here: https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/34610)

Teaching Social Action reading resources:

https://teachingsocialaction.org/resources/books-articles-videos-on-social-action

Things to think about for assessment reflection (from Scott Myers-Lipton)

What were the overall takeaways that you learned from working on your campaign? What did you learn about social change? about power? leadership? yourself? community? etc.

What did you learn about issue development? (i.e., making demands, finding the target, desire to fight for an issue)? Will this learning have any impact on you when you graduate?

How did your research (e.g., historical analysis, target analysis, and power map) help you in your campaign? Will this learning have any impact on you when you graduate?

How did you recruit students and allies for your campaign? What worked? What didn't work? Will this learning have any impact on you when you graduate?

How was your group dynamic? Did your group work well together? If yes, what contributed to your positive group process? If not, what contributed to that? Will this learning have any impact on you when you graduate?

Who was your target, and what strategies and tactics did you use to get them to meet your demands? Were you successful in getting your demands met? If so, why? If not, why not?

What was your favorite "action" that your group did?

Did your group get press? If so, how?

Did your group use social media? If so, please explain.

What advice would you give current social action students?

Appendix One: Ethics Approved information letter for elite research interviews – use pdf version supplied to send out

Faculty of Arts and Humanities
School of Politics, Philosophy and Area Studies
University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email:b.little@uea.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 1603 456161
Web:www.uea.ac.uk

2 February 2026

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: Activist Campaigning students

Thank you for taking the time to read the introductory email from our students. UEA runs a number of modules under the auspices of teaching social action, an international programme that promotes active citizenship and community advocacy on campuses around the world.

Supported by the Bonner Foundation in Princeton and championed in the UK by the University of East Anglia more information about how this form of teaching works can be found at teachingsocialaction.org.

The students will have contacted you about an issue they are exploring to see if there is a viable campaign to change a policy, practice or norm that they could conduct in an area of your expertise/responsibility. Such campaigns will always be safe, legal and within the spirit and letter of the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

As a form of research activity, any email exchange or meeting with the students is covered by the university's ethics policy. This means that: you are under no obligation from us to meet or talk with them; have the right to withdraw your consent to participate at any time; and can request to remain anonymous. You may also request any data you provide (including intervew responses) to be deleted at any time. Interview notes will be shared securely by the students within their group and with their teaching team, including as part of an assessed portfolio. Nothing you say in interview will be shared more widely without your express permission.

These rights under our research ethics framework should be considered alongside any other duties you may have in a public post – for instance the obligations of an elected official to respond to their constituents. Alternatively if you work in an advocacy or campaigning organisation, you may want to consider how the students entering into dialogue with you may help you to achieve your objectives.

If you have any questions about the students or the module, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you have any complaints please contact myself or the Head of School for Politics, Philosophy and Area Studies, Dr Rachael Mclennan (r.mclennan@uea.ac.uk) .

Yours faithfully,

Dr Ben Little (b.little@uea.ac.uk)
Assocaite Pro-Vice-Chancellor Civic Associate Professor Media and Cultural Politics