

# Assessing the impact of Community Service Learning. What do students (and partner organisations) say?

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# WHY COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

- ‘*functioning in a complex and diverse democratic society*’ (OECD, 2018)
  - (How) do we contribute to this as social scientific (!) disciplines, departments and academics?
  - Countering the perverse effects of the ‘economic efficiency’ drive within HE, the latter implicated with:
    - output-based funding and (internal) allocation
    - higher education seen as a mere ticket to the labour market
- Ghent University – ‘*Strategic Plan 2012-2016*’

# CSL CANNOT BE SEEN AS A 'NEUTRAL' TERRITORY

- Citizenship education in itself is *never* politically neutral
- The field of (higher) education forms a 'strategic action field' where institutions try to entrench themselves in a certain position
- Citizenship remains a contested term, often employed as an umbrella term. Contemporary political theory identifies various models (republican, liberal, communitarianism). Hence: no consensus about citizenship education.
- Each conception entails different implications for the curriculum. Any curricular choice regarding citizenship education will be entwined with different conceptions of what it means to be 'a good citizen'. Consequently, different programmes will generate different effects.
- In the real world: a wide variety of conceptions (conservative versus progressive/critical), as identified in empirical research by Westheimer & Kahne (2004).  
Consequently, they refer to the '**politics** of educating for democracy'

## ***Politics of educating for democracy***

*What kind of citizen do we need to support an effective democratic society?*

(Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p.239)

*Table 1*  
**Kinds of Citizens**

Personally responsible citizen	Participatory citizen	Justice-oriented citizen
<p><i>Description</i></p> <p>Acts responsibly in his/her community Works and pays taxes Obeys laws Recycles, gives blood Volunteers to lend a hand in times of crisis</p>	<p>Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment Knows how government agencies work Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks</p>	<p>Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice Knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change</p>
<p><i>Sample action</i></p> <p>Contributes food to a food drive</p>	<p>Helps to organize a food drive</p>	<p>Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes</p>
<p><i>Core assumptions</i></p> <p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community.</p>	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures.</p>	<p>To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time.</p>

# THE BEGINNING OF CSL AT THE FACULTY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

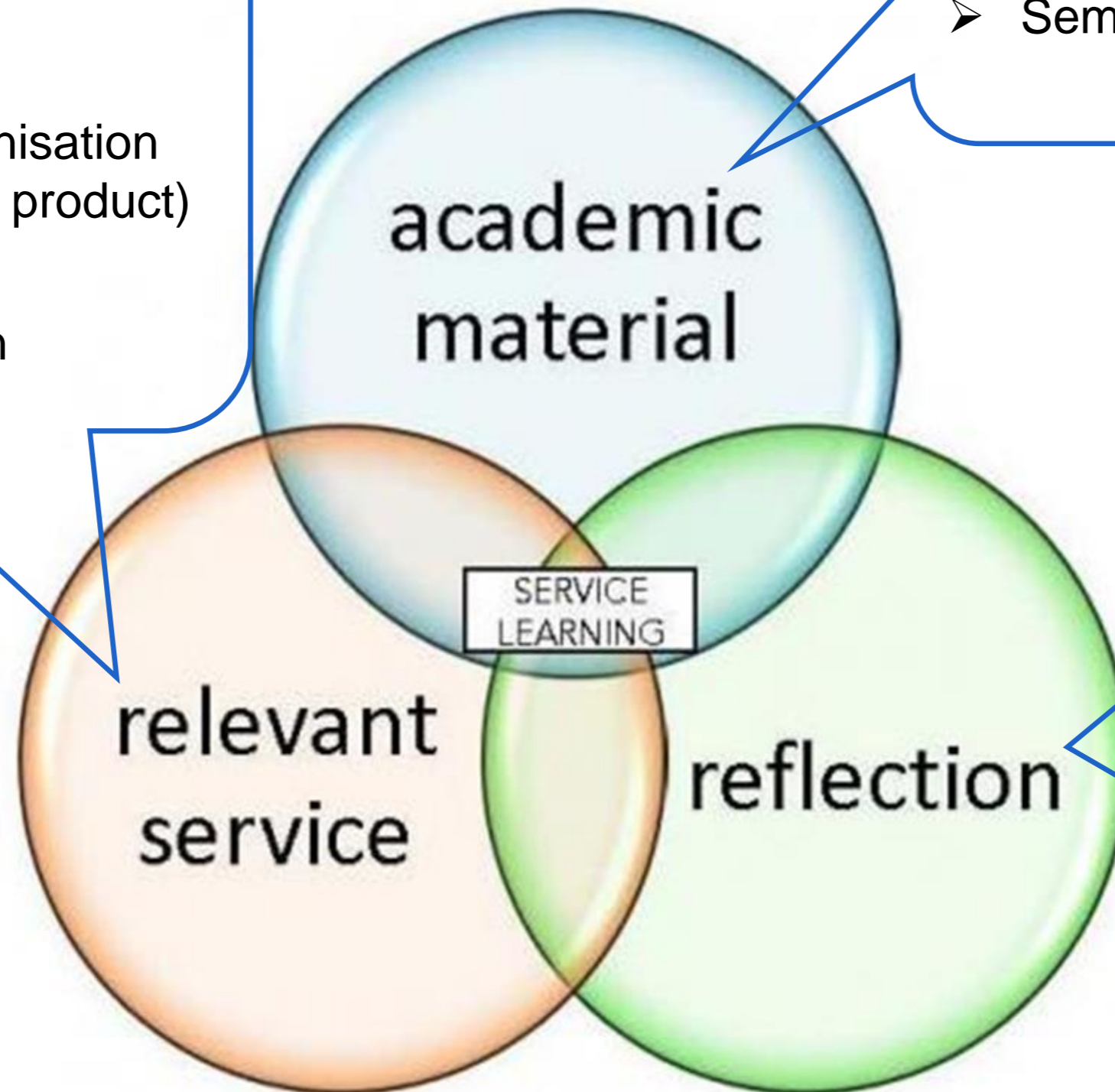
- CSL-track on offer since 2014-15
- Initially: ‘Seminar Political Sociology’  
MSc Sociology, major Political Sociology (L. Hustinx)
- In collaboration with the Teacher Training Department of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences (T. Valcke)

# PRESENT: 3 MODULES ON OFFER, AT MASTER'S LEVEL

- 'Seminar Political Sociology':  
(MSc Sociology, Major Political Sociology)
- 'Seminar: Contextualizing Health' / 'Seminar on Social Demography'  
(MSc Sociology, Major Health and Social Demography)
- 'Community Service Learning: Seminar Political Sciences'  
(elective course MSc EU-Studies and MSc Political Science: National Politics/International Politics)
- One term (3/4 months); 5 credits

# TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Presentation organisations
- Choice of organisations
- First appointment with organisation (defining assignment + final product)
- Participation in organisation
- Final product + presentation



- Lectures on citizenship (education)
- Lecture government, non-profit sector, non-profit organisations
- Seminar on link theory-practice  
⇒ problem-driven learning

- Students from Teacher Training Department coach reflection
- Lecture on reflection
- 3 to 4 reflection sessions
- Portfolio  
Log book (when, where, what?)  
Preparation reflection + response  
Final product + presentation

# DEVELOPMENT OF THE COURSE

## 3 components of CSL

(1) **academic component**, with reference within the programme sociology / political science;

*Academic competences*

(2) **practical component**, with social engagement in a specific organisation;

*Professional competences*

(3) **reflective component**, linking the academic and practical component and fuelling/questioning personal and social skills, values and attitudes.

*Sociology / political science in practice*

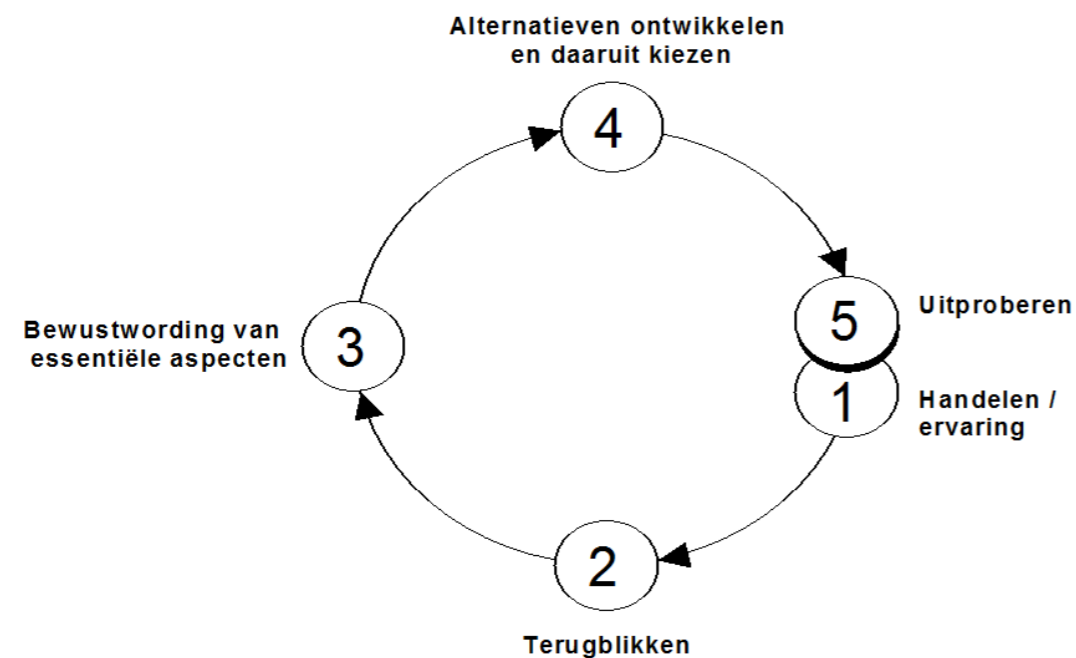
*Citizenship education*

*Personal growth*

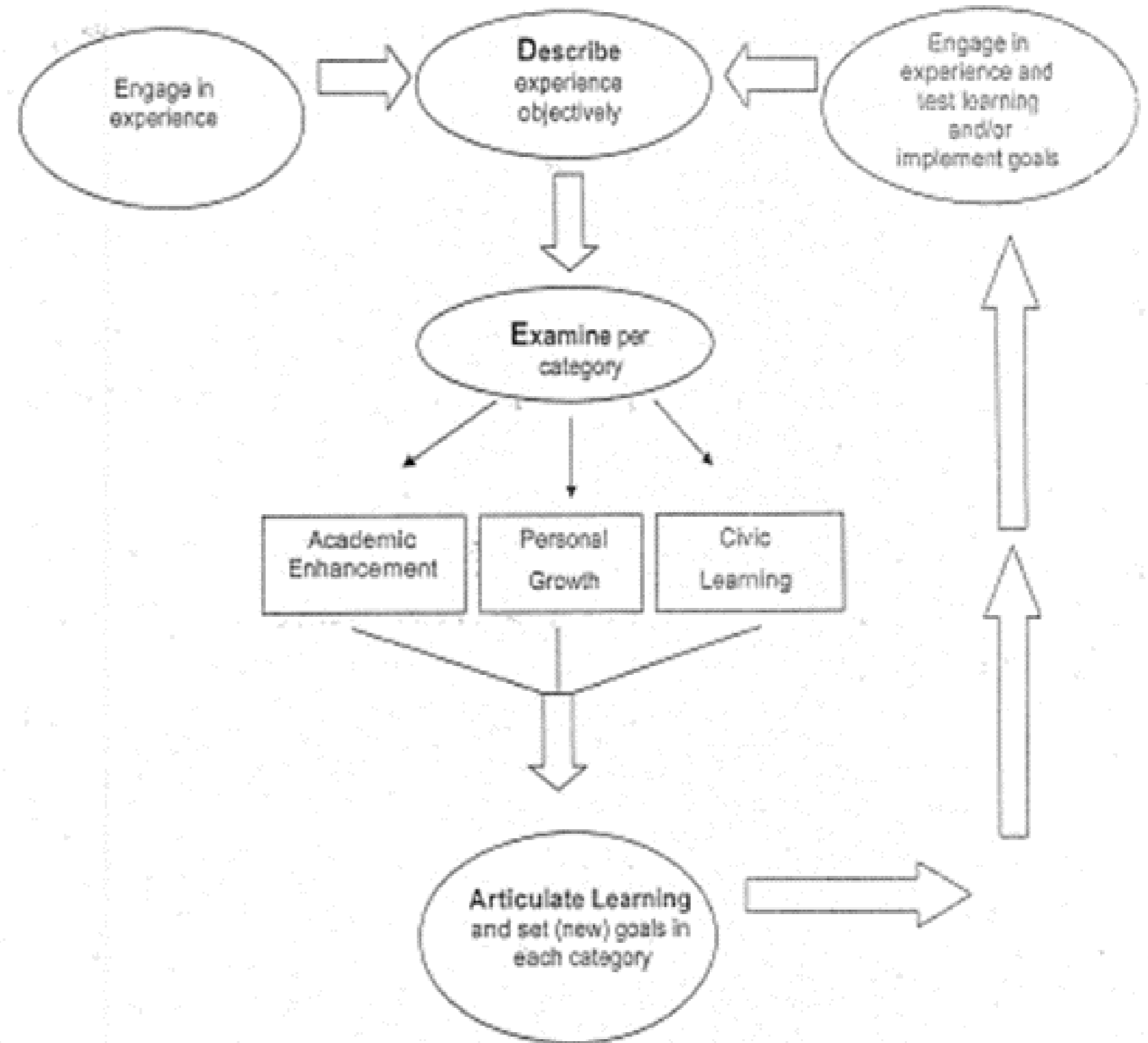


# STRUCTURED REFLECTION

- Anticipatory reflection  
(Pinsky & Irby, 1997; Loughran, 1996)
- Reflection-in-action  
(Schön, 1987)
- Reflection-on-action



Reflection cycle (Korthagen, 2002)



DEAL-model (Ash & Clayton, 2009)

# EXAMPLES OF CSL TASKS/PROJECT BRIEFS

- Evaluation of a city council district policy ('citizen participation initiatives')
- Development of a roadmap for organisations interested in a community currency
- Stakeholder analysis
- How is it possible to enable refugees to conduct volunteering work?

Qualitative research, quantitative research, literature study (or a combination)

# AT A WIDE RANGE OF PARTNER ORGANISATIONS:

For the Sociology modules:

- walk-in centre for young people (mental health)
- volunteering co-ordination
- welfare office of city council
- foster care policy organisation
- ...

For the Political Science module:

- social movement on impact of mining
- city council (citizen participation)
- regional authority/province
- community currency (non-profit organisation)
- ...

# ASSESSMENT OF THE CSL MODULES

Seminar political sociology	Seminar political science	Seminar comparative health / social demography
On-site assessment 25%	On-site assessment 20%	On-site assessment 25%
Log book, participation and preparation reflection sessions 25%	Participation 20%	Participation and preparation reflection sessions 15%
Final product 50%	Portfolio 60%	Portfolio 60%

# NEED FOR CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION (I)

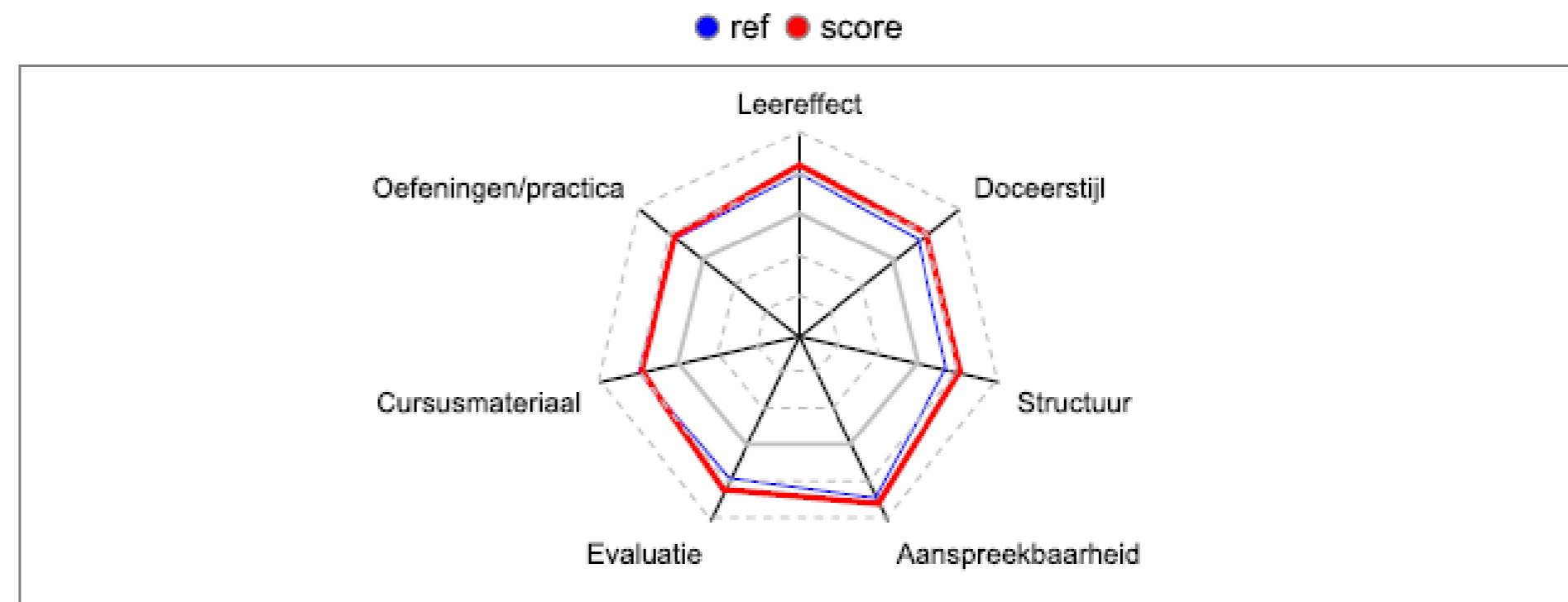
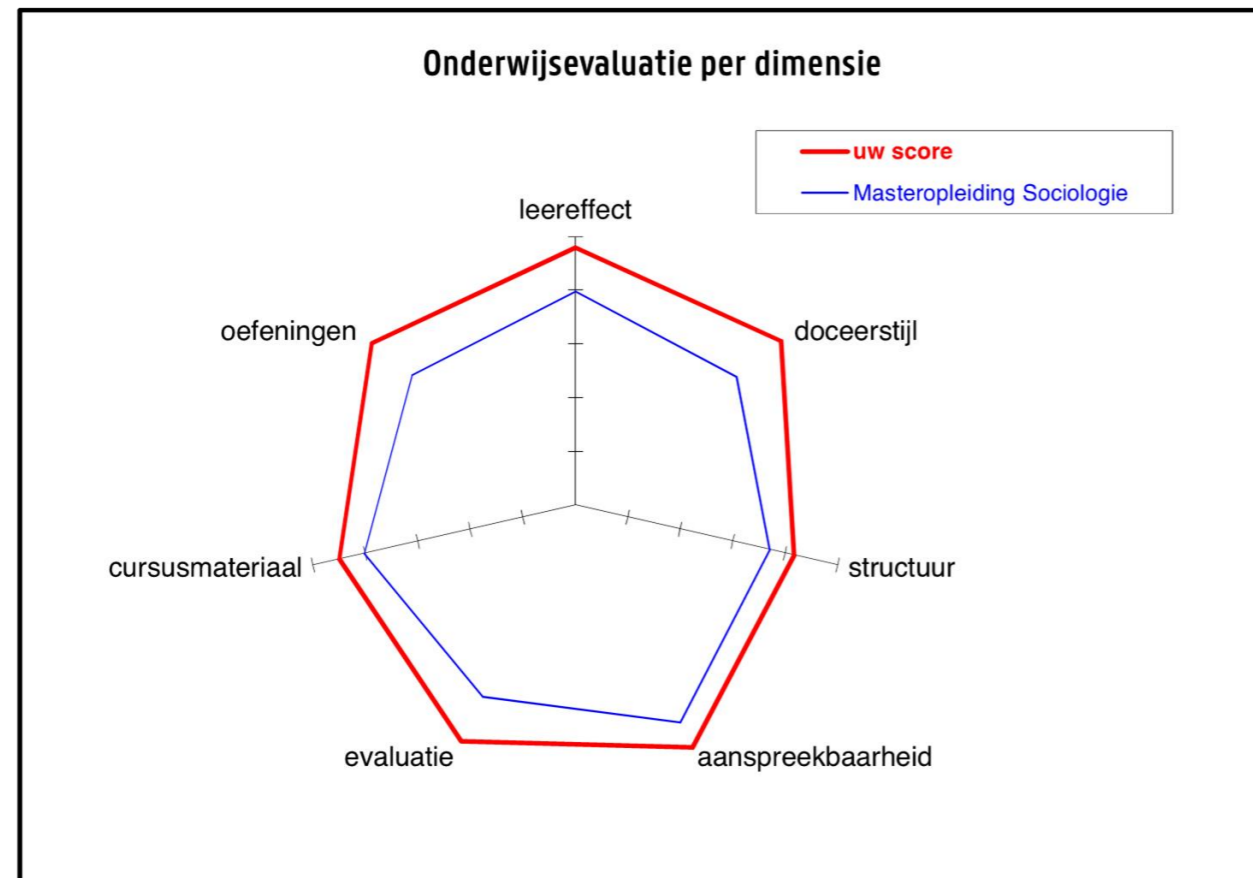
Up to now:

- Positive (informal) feedback from partner organisations
- Positive evaluation by students (standard module evaluation)

# NEED FOR CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION (I)

Score per dimensie

	leereffect	doceerstijl	structuur	aanspreekbaarheid	evaluatie	cursus materiaal	oefeningen
uw score	4,800	4,900	4,167	5,000	4,875	4,500	4,833
Ma-opleiding	3,985	3,828	3,704	4,494	3,952	4,028	3,883
signific. 0,05	S	S	NS	S	S	NS	S
size effect	LARGE	LARGE		LARGE	LARGE		LARGE



# NEED FOR CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION (II)

However... the need to explore more *in depth*:

- *what are the principal learning outcomes of a CSL-track?*
- *are these compatible with the kind of 'student-citizen' which we aim to foster? (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)*

# DATA COLLECTED

- 29 semi-structured interviews with:
  - (former) students (14 interviews, sometimes in duo)
  - teacher training students who facilitated the reflection (3 interviews)
  - staff from partner organisations (12 interviews)
- data collected between May and July 2019
- audio-recorded and transcribed
- preliminary findings



## ACADEMIC 'LEARNING OUTCOMES' OF CSL

- Appreciating the *social relevance* of the discipline:  
'beyond the ivory tower'
- Heightened sense of (internal) 'self-efficacy'
- 'Critical' reflection about the CSL-experience

# APPRECIATING THE *SOCIAL RELEVANCE* OF THE DISCIPLINE

*“I learned that the knowledge which we acquire during our degree, **that we can also apply it.** And that it’s an added value. I experienced that the city council really needed what we were giving them: a theoretical framework, a qualitative study based on focus groups and we also helped them to interpret specific data.*

*So what you’re actually start to notice that what we learn is not only the theoretical things, the Durkheims, the Webers, but that you can also apply knowledge. That’s what organisations really need. And I think that, perhaps, one seems to miss out on that, **that we, as sociologists, just not realise that our competencies and tools are not merely there to write PhDs, but that they actually have an impact on society. And that’s why I think that CSL is really important, to give more students the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills and to appreciate that sociologists may have policy relevance”***

(sociology student, CSL-project on volunteering co-ordination at a city council)

# HEIGHTENED SENSE OF 'INTERNAL SELF-EFFICACY'

*“This getting to know my way around in a new field, this felt mad, how fast this goes. Because I only knew so little about the field of health care. We did not have much background knowledge about that in our core module ‘Health and Illness’, all of that was really more theory.*

*And when you arrive there, it’s all practical things. And the health care sector is so complex but towards the end one developed an sort of understanding about that. And that’s what they (staff from the partner organisation, ed.) told me.*

*They asked me: ‘X, did you know something about the sector before’? And I said: ‘well, not much’. And then they told me it was mad, that I was able to find my way around the field so quickly. **And that’s how one develops confidence in oneself, like: ‘I can do this, and within a limited amount of time’.***

(sociology student, CSL-project on mental health at a city council)

# 'CRITICAL' REFLECTION ABOUT ONE'S CSL-EXPERIENCE (I)

*“The CSL-experience taught me to look at the world of volunteering in a more critical manner ... This in spite of the fact that I used to be a volunteer myself in the field youth work, helping young people to learn things, mean something for them, ...*

*And when I now look back on that, particularly when you're involved in volunteering co-ordination in residential care... that's all ok, but there are also the ideological issues and a certain engagement...*

*There's also the whole idea of getting more volunteers in health care, it's linked to the notion of the austerity state, that it's also a means to cut costs in care.*

*And that is the effect that it had on me in terms of citizenship, learning to look at things in a more critical way, even those things which had become dear to oneself through past experience. Learning to appreciate that social engagement is also embedded in greater social logics/rationalities”*

(sociology student, CSL-project on volunteering co-ordination in health care)

# 'CRITICAL' REFLECTION ABOUT ONE'S CSL-EXPERIENCE (II)

*Interviewer: And as a human being, as a member of society, how do you think your CSL experience actually changed you? Was there a you 'before' versus a you 'after' the CSL? Perhaps an E. who started to think in a more critical manner?*

*E.: I really don't think so... But I now know so much more about how NGOs operate...(...)*

*Interviewer: And what did you learn specifically?*

*E: Well, yeah, how NGOs operate... That there is indeed a certain culture of people who work there and yeah... I found all of them really kind people, but I just learned that I would never be able to work there. That's what I learned.*

*Interviewer: And why not?*

*E.: Well, it's all full of good intentions, but I felt that there was just not enough structure in that organisation. That's what I thought, personally.*

(political sciences student, CSL-project which explored the history of a development NGO)

## OTHER FINDINGS

- views of partner organisations were largely aligned with the students' accounts, particularly in terms of the reported sense of 'self-efficacy'
- iterative nature of the process of conducting research for an organisation was seen as a learning experience in itself
- reflection deemed relevant, however: tools were seen as (too) generic and/or artificial

# CRITICAL REFLECTIONS: WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- Teaching methods are not neutral: institutional limits (micro practice)?  
cf. (subversive?) youth actions for climate change
- Our research and the official course evaluation point towards a significant learning effect  
However: self-selection of students (they are already 'engaged/critical'), ...
- Not every student displayed the same level of critical/political reflection on their CSL-  
experience. Should all CSL-students be (made) aware of the 'politics' of citizenship  
education? (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)
- Still: risk of instrumentalisation of social engagement? Good for students' cv; branding of  
universities, ...
- Interdisciplinarity: academic interest vs interest of organisation?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!





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