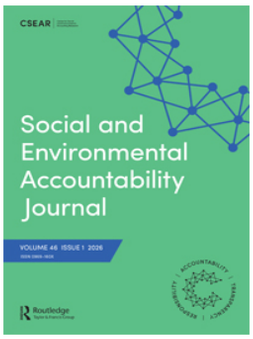

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Educating Students in Transformative Accountability

Rebecca Warren[a], Anne Steinhoff[b] and Samantha Woodward[b]

[a]Newcastle Business School, Newcastle City Campus, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; [b]University of Essex, Colchester, UK

ABSTRACT

In considering the role critical accounting educators can play in social movements, this paper proposes an approach for engaging students in transformative accountability education grounded in community organising methodology and practice. Community organising seeks to build civil society's relational power for collective action that holds power to account. In this paper, we outline the experiential practices through which we have engaged students in community organising, fostering deep and sustained engagement with transformative accountability. By collaborating with students and community partners on campaigns, we demonstrate how accounting and accountability can be taught differently and how we, as critical educators, can increase the civic impact of the business school and the university by contributing meaningfully to social movements. In this paper, we reflect on our experience developing and delivering community organising education and share the lessons learned for critical accounting education, including the value of co-creating accountability with students, and the impact of adopting a dialogic, practice-based approach to education.

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Transformative accountability; accounting education; community organising; counter accounts; social movements

> Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can turn into tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope (Freire 1994, 3)

Vignette from the Lead Author

When I first joined academia, it was to teach accounting with critical and financial accounting as my focus. As I was teaching, I was drawn to bringing more critical nuance into the classroom, using diverse materials to expose students to the broader impacts of accounting. As I began collaborating with community-based organisations, I also attempted to introduce students to the potential of what alternative accounting could look like, exploring counter accounts and social value. Despite these efforts, I often felt I was only scratching the surface. I wanted to do more, to change the way

CONTACT Rebecca Warren rebecca2.warren@northumbria.ac.uk Newcastle Business School, Newcastle City Campus, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

that students saw accounting, to take a more radical approach, yet I was constrained by the expectations of accreditation and the institutional imperative to train the next generation of accountants.

As my involvement in activism and social movements deepened in my research and personal life, the contradictions between what I taught and what I believed grew increasingly stark. It became harder to convince myself that embedding critical perspectives within the traditional curriculum was enough. In 2017, at an accounting education conference, I heard Nicholas McGuigan speak about the urgency of transforming accounting education in the face of the climate crisis. This was an inspirational keynote speech. Afterwards, we spoke at length about the challenges and possibilities of embedding critical and radical approaches into pedagogy. I shared my experiences growing up in social housing, and my concern about the increasing number of people experiencing homelessness in the UK. He challenged me to imagine what it could look like to involve students directly in addressing these issues. The seed was planted, but I still lacked a clear plan for how to go beyond the surface level of including critical perspectives, bringing key pieces of literature and case studies into my lessons and encouraging some students to undertake a more critical approach to their dissertations.

That changed when a colleague introduced me to a partnership the university had with Citizens UK (CUK), a national community organising organisation. While the partnership had remained largely untapped, a few senior management members and engaged colleagues were interested in exploring its potential. We applied for a small amount of funding and launched a pilot in 2020. The pandemic delayed our plans, but by 2021, we launched the formal module. In the meantime, I immersed myself in learning about CUK's community organising methodology. During lockdown, I completed their online training and had several 'light bulb' moments. As I deepened my understanding of community organising, I began to see accounting everywhere. One of the main foundations of the CUK approach to organising is building relational power and drawing on that relational power to organise money. As an accounting scholar, I could see how the concepts lie at the heart of accounting and accountability. Around this time, I also encountered Martin Parker's *Shut Down the Business School* (2018), a sharp critique of how business schools reproduce individuals focused solely on personal and market success. Parker (2018) calls for a radical alternative, a school for organising, which would engage students in a range of forms of organising, exploring alternatives to the current systems. This vision pushed me to ask, what would the role of accounting academics be in such a school? Or according to Sarah Amsler's (2014) framing, what would the role of accounting academics be in an education for radical democracy? Or, in Freire's (1994) terms, what would our role be in a pedagogy of hope?

At the time, I was also engaging with the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham, who inspired me to think more about the ways in which academics frequently focus on critique at the expense of opening up alternatives and possibilities. Their approach also spoke to my search for alternative practices, and I increasingly aimed to lean my teaching and research towards exploring possibilities and bringing new worlds into being, rather than limiting all of my engagement with alternatives to focusing on their limits (Gibson-Graham 2006; Schwittay 2025).

So, until the business school is shut down in favour of Parker's (2018) re-imagining and in the name of opening up the politics of possibility (Gibson-Graham 2006), what can we

as accounting academics do to teach and research differently now? This paper considers a way to break the mould of what can be considered part of critical accounting education through the practice of community organising.

We journey through one possible way forward, which focuses on engaging in community organising education as a method of teaching transformative accountability. One of the most important aspects to acknowledge is that this cannot be done alone. My co-authors and I, among other important contributors (Vazquez Garcia et al. 2025), have been on this journey together, exploring many different areas, perspectives and insights. In this paper, we reflect on and explore the approach that we have taken in relation to accounting and accountability. Over the past five years, we have developed and implemented an experiential pedagogical approach rooted in community organising, with the aim of building students' capacity to challenge dominant knowledge of accountability and enact change. We offer this work not simply as an academic contribution, but as an invitation for those who wish to reimagine the teaching of accounting and accountability in their own reflections and practice. Our core contribution is in demonstrating how community organising can serve as a transformative pedagogical framework for teaching accounting and accountability. We contribute a practice-based dialogic model of transformative accountability education, which reimagines the role of accounting educators as collaborators in social movements, in collaboration with students and community partners.

For this reason, this paper is written not only as an academic exercise but also as a reflection on our pedagogical journey, offering the foundations of a 'how-to' guide for teaching and engaging students in transformative accountability through community organising. We begin by reviewing literature on critical accounting education, followed by research exploring the role of accounting and accountability in social movements. We then outline our pedagogical approach, detailing its methodological foundations, before presenting our empirical experiences. We close with a discussion of the lessons and implications of this work and conclude on the power of transformative accountability in the classroom.

Teaching Critical Accounting

Critical accounting research has been exposing injustices and invisibilities created by accounting for many years (Lehman 2012), but there continues to be a mismatch between accounting education and the critical accounting project (Thomson and Bebbington 2004; Hopper 2013; Gebreiter 2022; Ghio, McGuigan, and Powell 2023). Through the perpetuation of this disconnect, as Chabrak and Craig (2013) point out, students and staff alike can feel discontent with the system. However, as it is presented as the only option with little room to challenge it, this can lead to feelings of dissonance and despair.

Researchers in accounting have explored different ways that accounting education can encourage students to think critically, for example, through case studies of accounting disasters (Chabrak and Craig 2013), taking seriously the notion of accounting as a language (Graham 2013), challenging the status quo in accounting (Boyce and Greer 2013; McPhail 2004), deeper engagement with accounting practice (Hopper 2013), engagement with emotional intelligence in decision making (McPhail 2004), and bringing

knowledge of environmental impacts into accounting education (Gray and Collison 2002; Saravanamuthu 2015). Importantly, Thomson and Bebbington (2004) suggest that *how* we teach is as important as *what* we teach, calling for further engagement with a dialogic approach to accounting education (Lucas 2008). To do this, accounting education has to avoid becoming a purely technical discipline (Gebreiter 2022; Boyce 2004; Tanima et al. 2024) and lean instead towards a reflection of accounting as a 'social and moral practice' (Carnegie, Parker, and Tsahuridu 2021; Tanima et al. 2024).

Boyce and Greer (2013, 107) argue that we need to engage in imagining alternatives in accounting, exploring accounting 'as it is *and* as it *could be*':

> The force of imagination can only be realized if individuals and collectives are galvanized in ways that do not treat the *status quo* as pre-given, natural, eternal and unalterable (Boyce and Greer 2013, 108, italics in original).

To realise this vision, Boyce and Greer (2013) propose that accounting education needs to be connected to the lived experience of the student and the teacher. Similarly, Dos Santos, Lopes, and McGuigan (2024) add that there should be further intersubjective exchanges between students and teachers across diverse backgrounds, to cultivate diversity in accounting practices.

In a similar vein, in 'Queering Accounting Manifesto', Ghio, McGuigan, and Powell (2023, 1) call for a rejection of a single view of accounting, to dismantle the 'heteropatriarchy in accounting', and experiment with teaching and research:

> We encourage researchers to experiment with new forms of research data collection and dissemination. Moving away from traditional power structures and distance commonly found with 'ivory tower' research, toward taking up residence within a glasshouse, dialoguing and involving all types of people and organisations. This would create the conditions required for a diverse and relational approach to accounting. This shift requires us to rethink and unlearn our current accounting education system to co-design an accounting space that is open to imagination, rebellion, and creativity. We call for more brave experimentation in teaching and researching accounting. Finally, this scholarly-activist approach to overcome heteropatriarchy can be adapted to professions other than accounting that face similar (or not so similar) issues. This will require in-depth exploration of the oppressive norms and the emancipatory possibilities (Ghio, McGuigan, and Powell 2023, 9).

In line with their call, this paper moves away from the normative foundations of what may usually be considered accounting education to present the ways in which community organising can challenge and change decision making (Ghio, McGuigan, and Powell 2023). Through community organising, we are able to hold space for one another and engage in an 'open dialogue founded upon love, humility, and mutual trust' (Ghio, McGuigan, and Powell 2023, 8).

Tanima et al. (2024) similarly explore how accounting education should be opened up, but do so through a decolonising approach that directly addresses the ways in which accounting education is shaped by colonial and neoliberal ideologies that privilege technical skills over social and moral dimensions. Drawing on reflections from their two-year journey through *Jindaola,* an Aboriginal knowledge programme aimed at decolonising education, the authors explore how connecting with Aboriginal ways of knowing can challenge the technocratic and colonial foundations of accounting curricula in meaningful ways.

Through Indigenous perspectives, they were able to foster respect, reciprocity and responsibility across their teaching, research and governance practices, thereby creating a transformative pedagogy that equips accounting students with critical thinking and cultural sensitivity while repositioning accounting education as a catalyst for social and environmental justice. Tanima et al. (2024) conceptualise this form of transformative education as dialogism in action, in which multiple voices are engaged, critical thinking is encouraged and cultural sensitivity is promoted, while also questioning hierarchical power structures and creating inclusive spaces.

Boyce (2004) reminds us that to go beyond the status quo, we need to engage in 'tangential thinking', moving outside of narrowly constructed disciplinary boundaries and bringing in areas of knowledge that may initially seem outside of the scope of accounting education, but are, on the contrary, integral to accounting.

We have engaged in such tangential thinking. Whilst the students we teach in this way are not learning about accounting and accountability through an accounting lecture, accounting and accountability are still inherent within their transformative experiences of community organising. Through these experiences, students transform their understanding of accountability and change their ability to influence power and money, gaining a greater understanding of the way that society is accounted for, how accounting impacts decisions and the tools and practices that are available to influence those accounts, practices and decisions, by forming powerful campaigns.

Accounting and Accountability in Social Movements

Researchers have explored the role of accounting and accountability in social movements (Gómez-Villegas and Ariza-Buenaventura 2024; Vinnari and Laine 2017; George, Brown, and Dillard 2023; George 2018; Catchpowle and Smyth 2016; Dey 2024). In particular, counter accounts have been identified as playing a key role in making the invisible visible, and revealing new perspectives (Gallhofer et al. 2006; Vinnari and Laine 2017; Laine and Vinnari 2017; Warren et al. 2024), when they are formed with alliances of organisations (George , Brown, and Dillard 2023; Tregidga 2017), in the name of social change and emancipation (Gallhofer and Haslam 2019; Dey, Russell, and Thomson 2010; Brown, Dillard, and Hopper 2015). To bring about change and accountability, counter accounts need not only to be written, published and shared, but also need to engage in persistent action through strong alliances, emotive testimony, whilst proposing viable alternatives, solutions and democratic imaginaries (Norris et al. 2024; Warren et al. 2024; George, Brown, and Dillard 2023; Tregidga 2017).

Social movements bring together civil society to make change on various social issues by changing social systems and power dynamics to form counter hegemonic positions (Smucker 2017; della Porta and Diani 2006). There has been a long history of social movements and social change across the world through a range of different approaches (Solnit 2016; Smucker 2017; Reinecke 2018). This paper focuses on CUK's approach to community organising, built out of the teachings and practices of Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation in the US (Bolton 2017; Beck and Purcell 2013).[1]

This form of community organising places those most impacted by the issue at the centre (Bolton 2017; Wills 2012; Legg and Citizens 2021; Bunyan 2021), exposing those

engaged to new understandings of lived experiences which push them to act and be together differently (Le Theule, Lambert, and Morales 2024; Amsler 2014).

Community organising education, we argue, develops an embedded way of exploring and understanding accounting and engaging with transformative accountability, beyond the abstract, by engaging in collective action, democratic practice, power and politics.

So far, little has been said in the literature about the concept of transformative accountability. What has been said is that accountability can be seen as transformative if it leads to action, which changes the conditions of society, not only changing the focus of monitoring and reviewing practices (WHO 2017). When engaging in research on mental health obligations, Yamin (2010) identified that accountability can only be transformative if we go beyond an outcry of injustice and move towards tools and solutions that will change the system, institutions and structures that are dominant, whilst also building different relationships between the community and power holders.

We agree with this proposition, but we also add that for accountability to be transformative, it must emerge from the bottom up; it must bring civil society together to enact change and hold power holders to account; and it must engage both community members and power holders in a journey of transformation so that they see each other and engage with accountability differently. Engaging deeply with accountability, rather than only observing it, is fundamental to the transformation process. Thus, we argue that community organising provides important tools for transformative accountability (Bolton 2017) that, as we will show below, can be used to engage students in a transformative experiential learning process.

Accounting and accountability play an often hidden role in the organising of movements towards new realities (Gómez-Villegas and Ariza-Buenaventura 2024; George, Brown, and Dillard 2023). It is this role that needs to be brought into our accounting and accountability education. Often, the dominant practices and approaches of accounting education preclude such possibilities. Therefore, drawing on opportunities and partnerships that may initially appear outside or beyond the practice of accounting can lead to experimentation with and identification of new ways forward,[2] in the name of transformative accountability.

Pedagogical Approach

The pedagogical approach of our work follows researchers who have explored education for radical democracy (Amsler 2014; Amsler and Facer 2017; Schwittay 2025). Amsler (2014), who studies the relationship between education, democracy, political action and activism, argues that education spaces should incorporate prefigurative practices and experimentation with alternative ways of being and emancipation (Amsler 2014; Olin-Wright 2012). In our case, by working together in an alliance on issues of accountability, students are able to engage in collective working and action (Amsler 2014, 286):

> Pedagogies of community and solidarity are therefore important dimensions of prefigurative politics within existing institutions because they enable not only the critique and re-imagination of ourselves, others and society, but also because they recognise the affective and social labour upon which critical thought and practice rely. Pedagogies of becoming, encounter and sociality have the potential to oppose and undermine capitalist rationality and to strengthen radical friendships, knowledge and practices.

As this paper shows, enacting accountability through the prefigurative methods of community organising in the classroom pushes the boundaries of the ways that students understand accounting and accountability. To do this, we:

> … actualize a humanizing pedagogy; engaging … students in praxis, reflection, and action upon the world in order to transform it (Fránquiz, Ortiz, and Lara 2021, 382).

In 2019, we began working with CUK to develop a project that would engage students from across the university in experiential learning (Vazquez Garcia et al., 2025). As this partnership on community organising evolved, we ourselves became increasingly involved in the methodology and events, attending national training, participating in campaigns, and at the time of writing, the lead author serves as co-chair of the local Citizens alliance that we work with.[3] Working closely with CUK and the local Citizens alliance, we co-created a transformative educational experience in community organising. In this programme, students design and run their own campaigns over the course of the year, collaborating with numerous external organisations. Through these practices, the module has required us to rethink the boundaries of our academic roles, including leveraging our relative power and privilege as academics in support of these campaigns (Contu 2018, 2020; Grant 2021).

Over this period, we developed and delivered learning materials for a transformational educational experience that has engaged more than 150 interdisciplinary students. This includes four cohorts of students across four different years. These students enrolled in the module in their final year of their undergraduate studies as a capstone project from a range of degrees across the Social Science Faculty and the Arts and Humanities Faculty, including, for example, law, politics, sociology, business management, accounting, and film studies. The training takes students through a series of workshops which engage them with self-interest, power and power analysis, how to listen and engage with communities, the importance of 121s, involving deeply reflective exercises throughout, and role plays. In the later sessions, we focus on workshopping their campaigns in their groups. Our approach includes various external speakers from the community, sharing their experiences of community organising with the students, and workshopping their campaigns with them (see the appendix for and overview weekly outline). In terms of learning materials, there are connections made throughout to many different disciplines due to the module's interdisciplinary nature, and we continuously draw on social movement theory and various books written by community organisers to create links between theory and the fieldwork. Throughout, the students are implicitly supported in reflecting on accounting (particularly focused on the importance of organising money) and accountability, reflecting on power, who is accountable for the issues they are focused on and accountability towards one another within their groups. During the lifetime of the project, we have engaged in participatory action research methodologies, collected detailed records and observations and conducted 53 interviews with students.[4] This data has provided the basis for a detailed thematic analysis in this paper.

In what follows, we elaborate on the transformative education that we have engaged students in and the ways that these practices have the potential to disrupt accounting and accountability education.

Creating Counter Accounts with Students

Citizens UK (CUK) have developed a 'method for everyday democracy… for people who are angry with the ways things are and want to do something about it' (CUK 2024a). Their method for creating a social movement does not focus on protest as such, but instead focuses on drawing on a tried and tested methodology for building strategies for continuous and persistent action towards change and accountability. CUK sits at the national level, with various local chapters across the country engaging in national, regional and local issues (CUK 2024a). For example, in their living wage campaign at the national level, they have developed the living wage foundation, which works with organisations across the country to accredit them for paying the living wage, whilst at the local level the different chapters bring together alliances of civil society organisations to campaign for local organisations to begin paying the living wage (Citizens 2024b).

Universities across the country have engaged with CUK in various ways (Jarvis 2024; Martinez Dy et al. 2024). For example, Jarvis (2024) identifies that community organising can be drawn on to create engaged, transformative, place-based learning, which enhances civic responsibility as it provides a way for students to take anger and turn it into action. CUK focus on community organising that builds relational power, to challenge power dynamics and empower those most affected by the issue to campaign for change and hold power holders to account (Bolton 2017). By bringing the approach into the classroom, Jarvis (2024) identifies that students are able to translate their desire for change into action, becoming empowered beyond feelings that they cannot have influence.

When we teach accounting students, we often do so in ways that endorse the dominant system, and continue to reinforce and perpetuate it, rather than exposing students to ways of changing it. This teaching can contribute to a sense that change is impossible. By engaging with community organising traning, and developing counter accounts with students which are centred around campaigns of their own choosing, students are empowered to engage in alternative approaches to accountability.

After participating in community organising training and reflecting deeply, students work together in groups to design and build a range of different campaigns. For the campaigns, the students collaborate closely with the teaching team and external community partners. Some examples of campaigns include:

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the community
VAWG on campus
Night bus access for students
Campaigning for the university to stop engaging with weapons manufacturers
Refugee and migrant justice
Climate justice
Bringing British Sign Language level 2 education onto campus
Creating a housing guarantor scheme to stop the exploitation of students by guarantor services
Improving street lighting

These campaigns consist of a range of approaches according to the direction that the students decide to take, including oral testimonies, visual artefacts, social media

campaigns, public events, surveys and listening reports, all leading to their main output, which is a presentation at a public assembly on campus, elaborated on in the following sections. To engage in these campaigns effectively, we teach students about power, and the concept of building relational power.

Building Relational Power for Transformative Accountability

A foundational part of building relational power is exploring with students the power that they hold and the ways that they can build relational power to make change and push for accountability. The concept of relational power simultaneously empowers students but also encourages them to recognise their own privilege in whichever form they hold it, so that they can have deep and meaningful engagement with the community. Often, power holds negative connotations and is therefore something that many people steer away from as they believe that it holds an inherently corrupting nature (Smucker 2017; Bolton 2017). Through community organising training this perception is challenged, and students are encouraged to reflect on what power is, presenting it instead as a neutral concept that can be used in different ways, but also as something that is required if they ever want to make change or 'get a seat at the table' (Bolton 2017), as one student reflects:

> Obviously, that changed my mind about power dynamics in general, right, I mean not only can you get a seat at the table, you can influence change (Interview 1)

To 'get a seat at the table', students are encouraged to build relationships and come together differently, as without building this relational power, there is no way that they can influence accountability:

> It's changed the way I thought about community work having power. We learned about grassroots activism in my course, but they never actually explained how it worked … [so it's] really eye-opening to see how a community working together could have so much power to bring about change (Interview 8).

This perspective challenges the individualistic nature of our society, which prioritises efficiency over humans and relationships, a prominent part of accounting and accountability (Ghio, McGuigan, and Powell 2023; Morales, Gendron, and Guénin-Paracini 2014; Van den Bussche and Morales 2019). Instead of building strong subjects that take collective action together, dominant financial and hierarchical forms of accountability produce subjects that are exposed, vulnerable and feel a constant sense of insecurity (Messner 2009; Roberts 2009; Warren et al. 2024). We aim to challenge this in the module:

> The connections that we've made throughout the module, I think there is no other module where you can bond with your classmates as much, where you actually have to go through those issues, that are not just making a presentation, it's actually the relationships and the connections (Interview 17)

Teaching students how to build relational power and then working with them to do it in action, around their campaigns, encourages them to reflect on the ways that collective action can impact accountability, by building strong teams and relationships that counter individualism and towards collective action. For example, across the years of working on this project, three groups of students engaged in a Migrant Justice campaign.

This campaign involved the students developing strong relational power in their team, with the alliance of organisations that we worked with (including schools, charities, other universities and faith groups), and power holders themselves, so that – in this case – we could push the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) to give greater attention to safety concerns and experiences of people with migrant backgrounds, particularly, crimes that they were facing. Through sustained engagement and respectful dialogue, we gained initial wins focused on street lighting and built a strong relationship among the broad-base campaign team and the PFCC's office. For the Migrant Justice campaign in particular, the students collaboratively organised a relational event where testimony was shared with the PFCC's team to immerse them in the lived experience of migrants and build understanding and empathy. Through a strategy of relational power, the campaign team was able to push the PFCC to commit resources, maintain ongoing dialogue around issues of hate crime and exploitation and fund a legal support programme for migrants. This approach transformed the power dynamics by enabling civil society to come together and bring key testimonies from migrants to the table so that they could be heard and action could be taken. Without building strong relational power, this would not have been possible.

Self-Interest and Accountability

In order to understand and work with power, community organising methodology argues that we need to have a deep understanding of self-interest (Bolton 2017). This includes both the self-interest of power holders, the self-interest of the community and the self-interest of the individual, without engaging in selfishness. Exploring the self-interest of power holders encourages students to think differently about power holders, their role and how to hold them to account:

> I don't like polarising opinions… And I think learning about power holders, learning about self-interest, and learning about how hard it can also be to be a power holder because of all the constraints you have… Now, I think it's not that power holders don't want change, but they have to be nudged in the right direction, or instead of being attacked, and being considered as pure evil, people need to understand their self-interest, and understand that to achieve change you need tangible solutions. You know it's nice to have the big ideals - justice, peace, liberty, human rights for everyone - but if they're just ideals, and not actions, you'll never get there. Like the community organising mindset, and especially Citizens UK, and the steps of organising is you plan, and negotiate, and find tangible, manageable solutions… I want change, but how? And starting small, starting from your community, expanding, and then finding tangible solutions… (Interview 24)

How change can be made and how power holders can be held accountable has to come from a deep understanding of what the power holders' self-interest is, and how to meet that self-interest with a tangible ask. To give an example of this, several of the campaigns that students focused on targeted power holders within the university to push them to make changes internally, such as increasing support for women facing violence on campus. To engage power holders in this campaign and get them to act, students had to consider and research in depth the self-interest of university senior management, in this case the reputation of the university, student recruitment, and meeting the regulations of the office for students, to name only a few. During this campaign, the students would counter the account from the university that adequate support was in place and

accounts from the police that they were aware of VAWG taking place across the region and tackling it adequately through the correct support. Through their counter accounts, they would demonstrate that the necessary support was not in place for many women. Connecting the campaign to self-interest holds the power holders in a different light for the students, encouraging them to reflect on and consider their negotiation methods. A key part of engaging with this self-interest, planning negotiation methods, and bringing about change and accountability involves bringing in strong testimony to the counter account, so that they can clearly demonstrate their position, highlighting the issues being faced by those most affected.

Building Counter Accounts through Deep Community Listening

Within the campaigns, we are aiming for new forms of accountability and therefore need to develop new accounts of the issues by doing in-depth community listening and research. The listening leads to a deeper understanding of the issues being focused on, and a community-led approach to solutions. By engaging with different accounts of issues, rather than the dominantly presented accounts, students are able to challenge their own view of the world by engaging in humanising pedagogy (Fránquiz, Ortiz, and Lara 2021). Engaging in in-depth community listening is challenging, but it also encourages critical thinking and reflection on our role in society by engaging deeply with difference, oppression and social injustice (Avery et al. 2024; Freire 1970).

Throughout community listening and building relational power, students collect and bring testimonies into their counter-accounts. We work closely with students, encouraging them to avoid a focus on surveys and instead have deep and meaningful conversations, so-called 121s, with each other and community members (Bolton 2017), to build counter-accounts:

> I think I definitely got more confident and I definitely like the way of listening – how listening is an important part of just being part of the community in general … I always knew that but I never knew how to exactly do it, so I think that was just a good experience … that it is actually possible … actually we can do something bigger, so it's essential to listen to what those people actually, the people that we're trying to help, what they want to achieve, rather than put our, the whole idea of paternalism, or like not putting our objectives above the people that are actually the ones in need (Interview 17).

This experience pushes them to build counter accounts from what they are hearing in the community, rather than only focusing on their own views, or currently dominant accounts, by exposing them to the lived experience of others.

> I think it made me realise that there's a lot more to do for women and girls, sadly, and also the extent to which it's happening. I think before I was quite naïve, and probably like other people, [I thought] it's not happening on campus, it's not happening around here, it's fine, but obviously, it's clearly an issue that's been kind of neglected. I can see, now, why people are made to kind of think it's not a problem when it is, and I think it did kind of empower me to want to do more, and to continue campaigning for it. I just want to help the victims, and try and get stuff done (Interview 29).

As this interview points to and the following interview similarly shares, this exposure to the lived experience of other people pushes them forward in their action:

> Well for a start being a woman myself and living with such issues and doing the listening on [campus] … it made me feel like I need to get a change started now because it could be too late, and it's just something I've been passionate about for as long as I can remember, so it's just something that helped me, and going onto this module it was something I knew I was going to be able to start (Interview 10).

In line with the call from Ghio, McGuigan, and Powell (2023, 8) that we should hold space for one another and engage in an 'open dialogue founded upon love, humility, and mutual trust', community organising forms and encourages these practices. This listening and other training sessions on the module lead the students towards think about what they can actually do to enact change that matters. This approach brings to light the power of different forms of counter accounts. For example, one group of students campaigned to improve the sexual violence, harassment and hate crime reporting system at the university and through their campaign, they presented testimony from those who had engaged with the system, countering the university's account of this system and its portrayal as an accessible form of reporting. They also countered the account that there was adequate support for students who had been victims of sexual violence through security and the wellbeing team. The students then went on to present possible solutions for these issues based on testimonies, as a key part of the accountability process. All groups utilise a range of methods to form their counter accounts including focus groups, testimony gathering, and surveys (where necessary). They then pull together all the listening undertaken through these methods to form their counter account narrative which takes the primary form of a script for their final presentations. This script may also be turned into summaries, recommendations and scripts for negotiation meetings where they share their counter accounts and their asks with power holders in specific and purposeful ways.

Testimony is important when engaging with transformative accountability, as it centres lived experience and humility in the counter accounts, rehumanising the process of accountability. In contrast to the dehumanising effects of accounting that focuses on numbers, this approach brings emotions such as anger, frustration, sadness and hope back into the conversation, pushing for accountability that is engaged with the other (Le Theule, Lambert, and Morales 2024; Lehman 2012; Lehman, Annisette, and Agyemang 2016; Ghio, McGuigan, and Powell 2023):

> It was quite hard to hear some of the testimonies... It allowed me to feel more anger toward the issue and helped me engage with these stores to promote what we're trying to work for and explain to powerholders the reasons why we have such an engagement in this campaign and why change needs to happen now (Interview 10).

Engagement with campaigns and testimonies invites individuals into transformative accountability, by exposing them to the other's lived experience, provoking emotional responses, and motivating them to act (Le Theule, Lambert, and Morales 2024; O'Leary 2017). Transformative accountability is not only about changing how power holders respond to specific asks or demands formed through community organising, but also about changing one's own perception of the world and the way one acts within it, bringing a sense of becoming to the subject. As part of this process, students go on to actively present their campaigns in public forums and to power holders.

Presenting Counter Accounts to Power Holders

Once the counter accounts of particular issues have been created, students present their campaigns and their asks to power holders, to push for accountability, including an account of the costs, benefits and impacts of making the change being asked for. Students reflect on the impact that engaging with and holding power holders to account had on them:

> … it felt uplifting because I was with a group of people that understood what was going on, but also we were able to reach out and talk to the police and the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, like somebody really high up about these issues and the Hate Crime Commissioner … Oh, people are listening, and they are trying to do something about it … (Interview 8).

> *Q: What are you most proud of?*

> That I was able to present in front of quite a lot of power holders.

> *Q: What did that feel like?*

> It felt empowering. Very empowering because I never thought at the start of, like when I first started uni four years ago, I never imagined myself doing that. And it's completely changed me (Interview 10).

To create this moment of accountability, we developed the student presentations as public accountability assemblies (Warren et al. 2024). Whilst the presentation, which is a culmination of their work, is presented for grading, it is also a public, community-based presentation where power holders are invited to be present and engage with the counter accounts that are being presented. This set-up allows for a real impact on the issue:

> I think it was just that power of helping others and learning about how community organising works and how I could impact … putting myself in that position as I'd never done it before. Actually help with making change (Interview 10).

Engaging in experiential learning in accountability empowers students to see that it is possible for them to enact change and hold power holders to account. The students have not only learned a methodology for doing so, but they are also presenting their counter accounts to power holders, changing their view of the world and also their way of being in the world. The accountability assembly moves the students away from their initial feelings of apathy and despair, and towards the feeling that they can make a difference:

> So aside from making me realise that as 1 person I have the power to make change and that was such a big thing, because growing up I've always felt and been aware of the injustices that exist in society and I've never had a mechanism or the ability or the people around me to be able to make change like this but now I understand so much more about how it works, … There are so many things that happen that you feel that are wrong and people say they understand but they're not necessarily compelled to act so you feel like you're complacent because you're angry, but what can you do? Because you've never been taught that you can do something and it's made me think that this module is so important and community organising in general is so important and I think it should be taught in schools from a young age. So important that the people that face the issues can stand up to the government,

> politicians or whatever it is and try to make changes because they're the ones who live through it (Interview 9).

As this quote demonstrates, we have created a different dialogic education space (Thomson and Bebbington 2004), with an action orientated approach that engages with the politics of possibility (Gibson-Graham 2006). Working with students in this manner, forming campaigns, creating counter accounts, and holding power holders to account calls our role as educators into question. By presenting the experimentation that we have been undertaking in this area, this paper has raised important questions about our role as accounting educators. As we teach the next generation, what should our role be? And how should we approach this teaching? (Contu 2018). In our accounting education practice, what realities are we constructing or contributing towards constructing? And what realities are we ignoring or disregarding? (Contu 2018). In the following section we discuss and reflect further on what it means to work together with students to enact change, to reflect on how this approach challenges our position in the university (Contu 2018, 2020; Haynes 2023; Clavijo, Perray-Redslob, and Mandalaki 2024; Grant 2021), as well as the universities' position as a civic actor.

Discussion: Working Together to Make Change

Our Positionality as Civic Actors in Higher Education

Throughout this journey, we have engaged in continuous activist curiosity to ensure that we were growing the power of others, working *with* them, rather than falling into paternalism or the 'ivory tower' approaches so often seen in academia (Elkins 2012). Central to our journey has been our engagement with precarity and vulnerability, which lies at the heart of community organising, but also impacts the student experience and is increasingly experienced by staff in higher education. Teaching and collaborating with the students meant that we had to challenge our own privilege (Clavijo, Perray-Redslob, and Mandalaki 2024; Tanima et al. 2024).

These experiences raise important questions about how we are accountable as academics, and what we choose to do with our position in universities as institutions which are prominent anchors in communities, or have the potential to be so (Grant 2021). By being a part of these institutions, we hold a relative position of power and privilege, particularly in civil society. As such, it was necessary to consider how we could engage with this responsibility at a deeper level to move towards social change. Community organising emphasises the importance of bringing together a broad base of civil society organisations to demonstrate power to power holders, and push them to listen and act (Bolton 2017). By participating collaboratively in these campaigns as academics, we are able to leverage institutional positions to enact change. This involvement has led to a more authentic engagement with communities, moving away from research and teaching practices that are transactional or extractive (Avery et al. 2024). The alliance, through their close collaboration with students, also benefited in a range of ways. For example, CUK has derived significant reciprocal benefits from their engagement in this project with participation strengthening their capacity-building efforts, by mobilising students and staff to support the delivery and expansion of campaigns. The involvement of

the university has also provided strategic leverage within the region, enhancing CUK's ability to influence local agendas and broaden their reach.

While this collaboration has been highly productive, this is not always the case. We therefore remain highly attentive to ensuring reciprocity so that the relationship does not disproportionately benefit the university at the expense of CUK. To this end, we worked to embed mutual benefit into project design and delivery. Concrete outcomes include the advancement of specific campaigns – such as gaining joint funding from regional police on issues of migrant justice – which have been informed and supported by student research and engagement. The partnership has therefore generated tangible impact for CUK alongside educational benefits for students. Centralising these reciprocal benefits is important, given that students are often new to this approach and may find its expectations challenging to fulfil. This 'reality-check' is something that, in our role as educators, we should always be considering and reflecting on to ensure that relationships are not extractive in nature, which is oftentimes made more complex by the neoliberal approach to higher education currently dominant in the UK.

In our roles as educators, it is important to recognise that education is never neutral; that it is always political (Freire 1970; Avery et al. 2024). Education can either reinforce the status quo (which is often the case in accounting) or it can challenge the status quo by engaging in transformative approaches that shift the mindset of students (Freire 1970; Avery et al. 2024; Tanima et al. 2024). From this position, as transformative educators, this paper demonstrates one way to bring such transformative praxis into accounting education in a radically different way, engaging students in social action and civic engagement. To do this, we work closely with students, being vulnerable with them, and working with them in solidarity, rather than creating hierarchical or monological structures of teaching (Avery et al. 2024; Tanima et al. 2024).

Being Vulnerable with Students

Throughout this journey, we have developed both as human beings and as academics, challenging our ways of thinking and acting. We have felt solidarity with those that we have worked with and shared in their frustrations when they have not been listened to. We have learned how to be vulnerable together and how to keep fighting in the face of silencing and marginalisation.

A key part of this process is sharing with students, in a dialogic approach, why we care about these issues and our own lived experience. For example, the lead author shares in detail her experience of growing up in social housing, while others on the teaching team share their own experiences with social injustice. We also share our experiences of campaigning, where we have failed, lessons we have learned, the personal and professional challenges we have faced, and our successes achieved. This dialogue enables students to explore their own motivations for social change, and understand that we are working towards change *together*, rather than engaging in a monologic process of us teaching students how to enact social change and students trying to do so.

We are working *with* students in the campaign. When they are unsure what to do next, how to advance their campaign and how to hold power holders accountable, we are struggling with them, thinking through the methodology and tools for social change that we have, drawing on past examples and experiences and trying to figure out the

next steps together. In his work on teaching with radical hope, Gannon (2020) argues that the dominant education system engages students in transactional and instrumental approaches to education throughout their lives. Gannon (2020) calls for moving away from these dominant logics in education, to move towards systems and structures where students no longer feel at odds with educators or as adversaries, and instead to focus on finding a common cause with students, to become allies, fighting together in hegemonic struggles. Through working together on community organising and engaging in a pedagogy of transformative accountability, we create an environment grounded in this approach, breaking down barriers and forging new relationships with students (Gannon 2020; Schwittay 2025; Vazquez Garcia et al. 2025).

Through community organising education, we have created counter hegemonic projects that are performed in solidarity with students, alongside alliances of community leaders. Together, we bring the strength and power of many to hold power holders accountable in new forms of accountability. This work opens up different opportunities and possibilities (Amsler and Facer 2017) while remaining anchored in grounded methodology and practices.

Acting Differently

This approach involves not only 'writing differently' (Gilmore et al. 2019, 9; Boncori 2022) but also enacting our roles as academics differently. Moving away from acting as:

> … the disembodied scientist whose goal is a scientific knowledge bereft of ethics, care and understanding. This is the person that can stand in front of a class of students and teach about management as if it is a science, full of facts and supposedly accurately describing an objective, external world. These 'facts' and 'descriptions' licence managers and leaders to abjure care and consideration and pursue profit at the expense of all else (Gilmore et al. 2019, 9).

And moving towards engaging differently, including writing differently, researching differently, accounting differently and teaching differently (Bristow, Robinson, and Ratle 2025; Gilmore et al. 2019), not escaping from academic rigour, but aiming instead:

> … to deepen and broaden our understanding of 'the world' through research and theorising in which the writing itself contributes to research and theory … Writing differently as we have seen outside the discipline of management has been imaginative, experimental, dialogic (Helin 2019) and reflexive (Richardson 1997) (Gilmore et al. 2019, 5).

In our work, we engage with the experience of heartbreak through the campaigns and solidarity with students (Le Theule, Lambert, and Morales 2024). We teach them not to be restrictive in their education, while also learning ourselves not to be restrictive in our teachings, research and writings. We engage in these forms of resistance, to make sure that the students 'understand the value of drawing on their humanity, in all its richness' (Gilmore et al. 2019, 9).

In a similar vein, Schwittay (2025) argues that we should create educational opportunities that open up students to alternatives and imagination, nurturing spaces for hope, possibility and action through prefigurative pedagogies. In this way, we democratise higher education (Amsler 2014), by engaging in whole person, embodied learning where students explore the complexities, contradictions and limitations of the world

through a range of experiences, whilst being empowered to build power and make change, moving beyond critique:

> I started to ask myself What if I could help students move beyond the seeming impasse produced by relentless critique and offer openings where they can currently only see closure? What if I could redesign my own teaching to inspire students to deconstruct but also to re-imagine the world around them, in radically different ways? Critical-creative pedagogy is my answer to these questions (Schwittay 2025, 2)

In line with this approach, we have focused on moving away from critique, negativity and scepticism and moving towards creating environments that acknowledge critiques but do not let them dominate our lives; instead focusing on nurturing, hope, empowerment and solidarity:

> In recognising the incompleteness, impurities and imperfections of its approach, generative theory assumes an experimental and open stance that pays attention to multiplicities and ambiguities. It seeks connections and collaborations, aims to consider rather than judge, embraces the unexpected and celebrates surprises. It is interested in building rather than (only) deconstructing, and when joined to critical-creative pedagogy, it ensures that its critical element does not overwhelm its creative sibling, putting both on an equal and mutually-supportive footing (Schwittay 2025, 4).

This orientation moves us towards an experimental approach that opens up possibilities rather than closing them down (Smucker 2017). Through community organising, students engage in campaigns that do not offer clear or easy solutions. Instead, they learn to question what is taken for granted, confront their own privilege, develop critical consciousness, and create new frontiers of possibility. At the same time, this work remains grounded in what is realistically achievable through transformative action, avoiding change that is naïve or disconnected from the real constraints of practice (Schwittay 2025).

Conclusion

Researchers in critical accounting have built a powerful legacy of exposing injustice and revealing what has been silenced (Lehman 2012). Yet, accounting education in universities remains largely focused on accounting as technical practice (Gebreiter 2022; Boyce 2004; Carnegie, Parker, and Tsahuridu 2021; Tanima et al. 2024). While critical educators have introduced alternative case studies, perspectives, and critiques of accounting (Chabrak and Craig 2013; Boyce and Greer 2013; McPhail 2004; Graham 2013; Gray and Collison 2002; Saravanamuthu 2015; Lucas 2008), more work is needed to explore the potential role of accounting education in social movements and social change, the reorganisation of the business school (Parker 2018) and the alternative forms that accounting education can take.

In this paper, we have explored how community organising can serve as a foundation for teaching transformative accountability. By equipping students with tools to build power, organise funding, and create counter accounts (Warren et al. 2024; Clavijo, Perray-Redslob, and Mandalaki 2024), we argue that critical accounting educators can actively contribute to social justice movements. Though this teaching approach may initially appear to sit outside traditional accounting education (Boyce 2004), we have shown how it challenges dominant forms of accountability (Haynes 2023; Ghio,

McGuigan, and Powell 2023; Thomson and Bebbington 2004), opening space for rehumanising and alternative practices (Clavijo, Perray-Redslob, and Mandalaki 2024; Lehman 2012; Gibson-Graham 2006; Tanima et al. 2024). The approach described has indeed influenced wider pedagogical practices within the business school and beyond. Following the initial implementation, additional modules have been developed that build on and align with the principles underpinning this work, extending its reach across related subject areas. Furthermore, the project has been disseminated widely within the university and across the higher education sector nationally. This has occurred through formal presentations, internal teaching and learning forums, and external platforms such as conferences and the CUK Higher Education Community of Practice. These engagements have inspired other educators to explore more critical and participatory approaches in their teaching, contributing to a growing movement towards embedding socially engaged, community organising and dialogic pedagogies, highlighting the ripple effects of engaging in these projects, and we have been inspired in many ways in return.

For us, community organising education offers a radically different way to engage with accounting and accountability. It has reshaped our understanding of our positionality within higher education (Contu 2018, 2020; Haynes 2023; Grant 2021) and demonstrated the power of working with students and communities on important social issues to not only rethink the world, but to act within it (Gilmore et al. 2019; Schwittay 2025; Vazquez Garcia et al. 2025). This pedagogical approach extends beyond teaching, also pushing us to consider our role in developing non-extractive research and creating knowledge exchange and engagement that works with communities (Grant 2021; Avery et al. 2024). Whilst the approach we adopt has been highly rewarding, it is not without significant challenges and sacrifices that should be acknowledged. For example, a significant challenge is the impact of increasingly neoliberal models of higher education, which makes projects like this incredibly difficult to sustain, due to the demand for scalability and resource reductions, among other issues. We found that the difficulty was not simply that our approach is unsupported within the university model; more significantly, university systems and structures actively obstruct this type of work. Additionally, the campaign-engaged work took a significant emotional and psychological toll on us as educators, especially alongside already demanding workloads. All of these challenges require further discussion and reflection beyond this paper alone.

Whilst we continue to operate within a higher education system defined by transactionalism and market logics which ensure a continued focus on grades, goals, success, individualism and profit (Amsler and Facer 2017; Schwittay 2025), through community organising, we have begun to challenge these expectations, creating an educational experience that is transformative for students and staff alike. Working with students to explore and engage with the tools and methodology of community organising, students engage in critical analysis, meaningful teamwork, communication, and negotiation, while cultivating imagination and hope (Amsler and Facer 2017; Jarvis 2024; Boyce and Greer 2013). In doing so, we move away from a tendency in academia to focus on critical practice without action or change, which can perpetuate an unhelpful cynicism (Schwittay 2025; Gibson-Graham 2006). Instead, community organising pushes for hope that is grounded in action, and as we have begun to demonstrate, in action for accountability.

What we have shared is only one possible beginning. We call on researchers and fellow educators to engage in teaching against the grain, to reconstruct education by engaging

with transformative pedagogy and transformative accountability. In prefigurative ways (Amsler 2014; Olin-Wright 2012; Schwittay 2025; Vazquez Garcia et al., 2025), these students have learnt how to organise money and power, to develop counter accounts, to challenge existing systems and to hold those in power to account. Ultimately, we argue that if we work together in vulnerability and solidarity, through community organising methodologies and utilising transformative accountability with students and community members, we can act on power holders and return power and accountability to communities and civil society.

Notes

1. Notably, there are many different forms of community organising and different histories and cultures outside of the Anglo-American approach that we focus on (Beck and Purcell 2013).
2. Whilst it may be difficult to bring this experimentation into predominantly neo-liberal educational environments, it is important to think strategically here, as these new ways forward can still be positioned as highly productive in higher education as they impact on the development of student skills and graduate outcomes, for example.
3. Citizens UK have formed many alliances of civil society organisations across England and Wales at the time of writing, referred to as local chapters, more details can be found (https://www.citizensuk.org/chapters/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=18136408258&gbraid=0AAAADMeiqXsliUia8xFLPI9eC-3uS7IE&gclid=CjwKCAjwvuLDBhAOEiwAPtF0Vk4qzB17_g-dl7j3AMIgkU212awtWI9hkjCqhRDBv6myMFqTCXsbLxoCYN0QAvD_BwE).
4. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the University of Essex Social Sciences Ethics Sub Committee: ETH1920-1133, ETH2122-0011; ETH2122-0780, ETH2223-1159; ETH2324-2011.

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Appendix. Indicative module outline

Term 1

Week 1: Introduction to Community Organising
Week 2: What makes you angry?
Week 3: How to build relational power
Week 4: Listening practice and ethics
Week 5: Listening to the community
Week 6: How to negotiate
Week 7: Power analysis
Week 8: Field trip
Week 9: Meeting Community leaders (networking session)

Term 2

Week 1: Refresher session after the break: How to make changes
Week 2: Stories and turn out
Week 3: Group work
Week 4: Organising and meetings
Week 5: Group work
Week 6: Group work
Week 7: Discussing actions so far
Week 8: Plans for final presentations
Week 9: Planning and evaluating
Week 10: Planning and evaluating