# Tips for Designing Social Justice (SJ) Projects[1]
Kris Boudreau and David DiBiasio, WPI

## A Challenging Problem or Question:

- To the extent you can, focus not only on SJ *problems* but also on *solutions*. Challenge and encourage students to think of themselves as agents of change.

- Start with your learning outcomes.  What content must you cover, and what should students be able to do by the end of the project?  Then find the topic that will allow them to master that content.

## Student Voice & Choice:

- Find ways to engage your students in identifying the problems they care most about and most want to help solve.  At the end of the project, ask students to identify problems for the next project teams. Ask them either to propose problems or to choose from a list of topics. You'll need to help them refine the topic from a large theme to a specific problem in some particular context or community, but let them decide on what topic they want to address.

## Authenticity:

- Think about using videos, short readings, guest visitors, field trips, interviews, news articles, and other sources (particularly primary sources) to orient students to the problem, give them context, and motivate them to care about the problem.  If possible, let them generate their own primary sources by interviewing, photographing, videorecording, mapping, surveying, etc.  If you need help locating resources, try Twitter for crowd-sourced syllabi (e.g., #ImmigrationSyllabus, #CharlestonSyllabus).

---

[1] Adapted from RadicalMath (2007), Buck Institute's Essential Project Design Elements, Patti Clayton's CurricularEngagement.com, and our own research into PBL for Inclusivity (NSF Award #1640499).

**A Public Product:**

- Consider partnering with a community organization that has a problem your students can help to solve. The student project could include a presentation or document to be delivered to that organization.
- Consider identifying other audiences: ask students to share their projects with family, friends, neighborhoods, their social media network, etc. Give them chances to design for an authentic audience who will value (rather than simply evaluate) what they have to offer.

**Reflection:**

- Student reflections are valuable in helping students put together the connections between their academic and personal growth. You could ask them to choose from a list one academic learning outcome (conducting original research, for example) and one outcome associated with their personal growth (feeling competent to enact positive change, for example) and conduct a critical reflection: first objectively describing an experience, then examining that experience, then articulating their learning. ("I learned that. . . when . . . and it matters because. . . and in light of this learning I will. . . ")

**Pedagogy Matters: Teaching for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:**

- It may not be enough to include themes of interest to a diverse student population; sometimes you have to actively help students see themselves and others as powerful by virtue of their unique and sometimes unenviable experiences –to help them reframe "deficiencies" as assets. WPI faculty Geoff Pfeifer and Elisabeth A. Stoddard have designed a number of tools to enable faculty to use an asset-based approach to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion. See, for example, their Asset Mapping and Team Processing Handbook.

- "Classrooms and Social Justice: Why Start with Pedagogy?" One-page handout by Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis of The Futures Initiative. Find this and other short handouts from "Co-Authoring Learning and Development: Transforming the Community College" (LaGuardia Community College and the Graduate Center, CUNY, 2018).

- Reality Pedagogy by Christopher Emdin.