
Creating Democratic Spaces: Jane Addams School for Democracy

By Nicholas Longo and John Wallace

Jane Addams School for Democracy is a community-based education and action center located in Neighborhood House, a 102-year-old settlement house on the West Side of St. Paul. The school is a collaborative effort of Latino and Hmong families of the West Side, the College of St. Catherine, Neighborhood House, and the University of Minnesota, including the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. Jane Addams School is based on an approach to learning in which everyone is seen as a contributor and a resource. The mission of Jane Addams School is to free and cultivate the talents, cultures, and interests of people from diverse backgrounds and traditions in order to add their energy and wisdom to the building of our communities.

In the summer of 1998, CURA funded an evaluation of Jane Addams School's work over the previous two years. In this article, we report on that evaluation and the lessons we learned about the power of democratic spaces in which the community and university are partners in a sustained dialogue.

What is Jane Addams School for Democracy?

To begin to answer this, we invite you to accompany us, in imagination, on a walking tour of Neighborhood House. It's a Wednesday evening, and our tour begins at 8 p.m., when the school's activities are in full swing.

In the first room, we find the Hmong-English Circle. There are twenty Hmong adults, five high school students, and fifteen college students, talking and working, mostly one-on-one, at five seminar-type tables. The room is buzzing with talk and laughter. The pairs are exchanging languages and cultures; the Hmong adults are improving their English speaking and writing skills, while the college students are listening to stories and learning to speak and understand a little Hmong. Many of the

Hmong adults are also learning about U.S. history and government, preparing to pass the citizenship exam. People are moving about, getting maps, pictures, and books from a resource table at one end of the room and bringing them back to work on with their partners. Some of the high school and college students who are bilingual in Hmong and English sometimes get pulled away from their partners temporarily to provide translation assistance. From time to time, Hmong children come into the room to check in with a parent, assist with translation, or show off the results of a crafts project from the Children's Circle.

As we head for the large Youth Center, which houses the Children's Circle, we pass a small kitchen, where we see five children, a high school

student, and two college students crowding around the counter and the stove. They are laughing and chatting as they prepare snacks for the Children's Circle. Tonight is pizza squares; last time it was brownies. The privilege of serving on the snack preparation team is passed around in an egalitarian spirit to all of the older children who participate in the Children's Circle.

Having enjoyed the snacks that were thrust on us with smiles and giggles, we are now ready to visit the Children's Circle. Tonight, sixty children, ranging in age from three to thirteen, are working with twenty high school and college students. If the Hmong-English Circle was buzzing, this room is BUZZING. We see children spread around the room in many small groups engaged in tasks like



The Jane Addams School for Democracy is located in Neighborhood House on the West Side of St. Paul.



Learning pairs work together on exchange of languages and cultures. This learning pair is part of the Hmong-English Circle.

making puppets, reading stories, piecing puzzles together, practicing a Hmong dance, or building with Legos. The high school and college students are sprinkled among the groups as coaches.

As we leave the Children's Circle on our way to the Spanish-English Circle, we pass a lounge where a small group—a college student and three older children—is working quietly. This is the creative writing group, where children write stories and poetry about their communities and their experiences. They have moved away from the busy Youth Center to the peace and quiet of the lounge. Writing in progress!

We come now to the Spanish-English Circle, comparable to the Hmong-English Circle but smaller. Normally this group would consist of ten Spanish-speaking adults and ten high school and college students working in pairs to exchange language skills. But tonight is a special night: the topic is food from different cultures, and the learning method is experiential. It is a potluck dinner; each person has brought a dish that connects with his or her cultural background. We see people sharing a meal and having conversations in Spanish and English.

We are just about through with our tour, but not quite. As we leave the Spanish-English Circle and continue down the hall, we pass another small room where three older Hmong adults are working with a younger Hmong woman. The Hmong adults are preparing to take the U.S. citizenship exam; because of their age and length of time

in this country, they are able to take the exam in Hmong and do not have to demonstrate speaking ability or literacy in English.

Finally we visit another small room, where four children are working with an equal number of college students on the children's homework. The topics range across all school subjects, from English to science. The college students do not do the homework for the children but rather coach them, ask questions, and suggest other examples to think about. The atmosphere here is focused and quiet, except for occasional gusts of laughter and conversation around the room.

Taking this tour on a Wednesday evening, you have seen a lot of what goes on at Jane Addams School. You have seen the multicultural and intergenerational character of the environment. You have seen the relaxed, informal atmosphere. But there is much you have missed, as is inevitable with a single visit. You missed the ad hoc planning groups that are constantly sprouting up, and you missed the special activity groups that meet on their own schedules outside the core Monday and Wednesday evening meeting times. You also missed the girls' Earth Day Club and the boys' Team Boyz Club, made up of children and college student coaches. You missed the weekly summer field trips to a farm in Wisconsin. You missed the group of Hmong and Latino women and college students who are weaving a paj ntaub together. You missed last July's day-long Freedom Festival. You missed the Health

and Wellness group—college students and neighborhood residents who meet on Monday evenings to discuss issues and plan activities related to health. And you missed the Public Achievement group from Humboldt High School, which has been preparing a video on the citizenship exam based on their experiences as immigrants and their work at Jane Addams School.

How Did Jane Addams School Come To Be?

In the summer of 1996, a group of students, faculty, and community leaders from the University of Minnesota, the College of St. Catherine, and Neighborhood House began discussing issues around democracy and education. The group asked, "How can our universities be greater resources to the broader public?" The students and faculty wanted to end the gulf between their universities and the community, and they believed that universities have a responsibility to the public. They also believed that people in the community have a great deal to teach university students, although this teaching is rarely legitimized.

The founding group hoped to create a "people's institution," a community-university partnership with several features:

- ◆ A community education and action initiative that would be "owned" by people of all ages who participated in the school. In other words, participants would feel free to not simply participate but also to create and build.
- ◆ Hospitable and democratic spaces where people would feel safe and free to be creative, and where there would be no hierarchies of authority or knowledge. These spaces would respect and highlight the cultures, talents, and experiences of diverse people.
- ◆ Integration of popular education, enabling people to start where they are, take ownership for learning based on their own self-interests, and learn civic skills.
- ◆ Use of resources to strengthen the neighborhood and influence public policy and public institutions.

Those who created this vision knew that if it were implemented—if a people's institution of safe and democratic spaces was created—it would be difficult to foresee what Jane Addams School would become. The first steps included consulting various groups of West Side residents who were already

participating in other Neighborhood House programs to find out what they wanted to learn. A majority wanted to work on the U.S. citizenship exam and language acquisition. Residents said they would be comfortable working

Evaluating Jane Addams School

As the above account suggests, Jane Addams School was not designed to be a place that provides a particular curriculum; rather, it is a space that engenders an open-ended set of learning



Children's circles, like the one in this photo, participate in activities like art projects, creative writing, reading, dancing, and putting puzzles together.

with college students, and they felt the students could learn from them about Hmong and Latino cultures. With this input from neighborhood residents, in September 1996, Jane Addams School started one learning circle, with Hmong, Spanish, and English speakers, neighborhood residents, and college students, all learning together.

Although Jane Addams School began without a paid staff or supply budget, it now has one full-time and two part-time paid staff people.* At any given time there are also three or four AmeriCorps members and ten to fifteen work-study students. The heart of the school, however, is the two hundred or so community residents, high school students, college students, and adult volunteers from the wider community who participate in the learning circles each week.

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opportunities. These learning opportunities can grow and change through time in response to neighborhood residents' desires for learning, with the colleges and universities as constant partners in that learning. Participants try to form relationships, be in constant conversation with the community, and make the school a common creation. This means that the school demands from its members not just their participation in existing programs but also their vision and creativity to make the school improve, adapt, and, where appropriate, expand its work.

Before undertaking the CURA evaluation, we already knew some ways in which Jane Addams School was succeeding:

- ◆ The numbers of participants had grown from 25 per week in the fall of 1996 to over 200 per week in the spring of 1998.
- ◆ Thirty-five members of the school had achieved U.S. citizenship.
- ◆ The intergenerational character of the school had blossomed. At the beginning, members of the school had been almost exclusively college students and adults from the neighborhood. By the summer of 1998, membership had

expanded to include many high school students from Humboldt High School as well as children accompanying their parents.

- ◆ The range of activities and topics around which participants in the school were interacting had broadened. The initial work of preparing for the citizenship exam, practicing English, and exchanging cultures had expanded organically to include games, crafts, singing, writing, homework assistance, a community garden, farm field trips, and a neighborhood festival.

Given these signs of success, our evaluation focused on two questions that get to the heart of the Jane Addams School as a safe, democratic space:

- ◆ What lessons can we learn about the importance of universities working with communities, rather than doing for communities?
- ◆ How do community residents and college students work jointly to define problems and design solutions?

To get at these questions, Nicholas Longo, who had himself been a member of Jane Addams School for a year, conducted open-ended interviews with children, high school students, college students, and adult members of the Hmong-English Circle and the Children's Circle. (Due to lack of time and resources, the Spanish-English Circle was not included in this evaluation.) We turn next to what we heard in the interviews.

Voices from Jane Adams School

Citizenship. Preparing for the U.S. citizenship exam is the primary motivation for Hmong neighborhood residents to participate in Jane Addams School. One immigrant who recently became a citizen commented:

Jane Addams [School] offers a lot of support for immigrants. People not only offer help preparing for the test, but just physically being there makes me feel strong to do things, like take the citizenship test and go to the citizenship ceremony.

English Language Learning. Language learning at Jane Addams School is done in learning pairs, where non-professionals become experts in learning together. The following observation about language learning was from an experienced language teacher who teaches French at a local high school and who is a member of Jane Addams School:

As a language teacher, if I had been in on the planning of Jane Addams School, I would have said, "You're crazy, this will never work." I would have said all I was taught: you need scope and sequence, common materials, structured activities. I would have said, "This will fail." However, I've never seen learning as one-on-one before. I now believe that one-on-one supersedes any other teaching strategies. You are able to get mutual understanding in one-on-one learning. People get lost in large group exchanges. In the one-on-one there is an urgency to understand because you can't turn it over to someone else. You are forced to invent ways to say things.

Linking Classroom Learning With Experience. Students from the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, the College of St. Catherine, and Humboldt High School participate in Jane Addams School as part of classes ranging from youth studies to geography to philosophy. Students explained the importance of community-based learning for their educational experiences:

It creates a space for what I'm about — linking policy and working with people. And as a policymaker, I shouldn't be making decisions without being on the front lines.

I try to teach about my struggles as the next generation of Hmong. And I try to learn about the older generation's story of coming to America. It is confirming to hear. I wish there were more Hmong students having this experience.

One example of the intergenerational approach was having parents come into the Children's Circle to tell Hmong folk stories. One Hmong parent who told the folk stories commented:

I felt good telling the stories. By telling the stories I hope that some of the children will keep it in their heart and mind. I hope they will tell it to their children. In my own experience, my father told me, and I hope my children will carry this tradition.

West Side Freedom Festival. Jane Addams School also spawns collaborative projects between community residents of all ages and college students. Each summer, for example, the school hosts a community-wide "Freedom Festival" to highlight the personal stories of many immigrants struggling for freedom, as well as to focus on the contributions that immigrants make to the United States. The Freedom Festival honors recent citizens and celebrates diverse cultures and common experiences through song and dance. The children of Jane Addams School work with Larry Long, a troubadour from Community Celebration of Place, to create a performance piece that transforms their parents' struggles for freedom into song and dance. Other cultural events include traditional dancing, music, singing, and poetry. One woman who sang a traditional Hmong song at the first Freedom Festival commented:

Part of the reason that I sang at the Freedom Festival was that I wanted to educate people about the Hmong and Hmong culture. I wanted to show that even though we are here without a country, we have talents and can contribute.

Farm Project. For the past two summers, Jane Addams School has purchased food shares from a local community-supported farm, the Philadelphia Community Farm. Every week throughout the summer, children, parents, high school students, college students, and faculty from Jane Addams School work on the farm, participating in planting and harvesting of vegetables, community-building games, and meal preparation. Each summer over



Jane Addams School prepares immigrants for the United States citizenship examination. Those who successfully complete the exam are presented with a flag and a letter from President Clinton.

Many adults who participate in Jane Addams School are attending school for the first time in their lives and are eager to learn English.

I came to the U.S. in 1979, and from 1979 until 1997 I mostly stayed home taking care of my children. There was no opportunity to learn English. Jane Addams [School] gave me that opportunity. I am thankful and have learned so much at Jane Addams [School]. I can now communicate with people in English. . . . I remember the first evening I came to Jane Addams [School]. I was learning the alphabet. It was the first time I had ever written or used a pencil. I broke the pencil that first time. I'll never forget that. I felt embarrassed because it was the first time, but we just kept working.

Intergenerational Character of the School. An intergenerational approach is essential to Jane Addams School, especially for immigrant families in a new culture. The school works to create an environment in which children learn with their parents, develop a sense of pride and confidence in themselves and their cultures, gain skills in problem-solving, and create projects for themselves and their community. Hmong college students commented:

Jane Addams [School] is a great bridge for me. It's a start. Translating in the cultural exchange has been really good for me because we talk about Hmong tradition and values. I didn't know a lot of these traditions. I learned those and taught things I've learned about American culture.

two thousand pounds of fresh food from the food shares have been donated to the Neighborhood House Food Shelf. In this way, the families of the West Side work together to provide fresh vegetables for their community. Seng Yang, a social worker at Neighborhood House, explained:

The donations from Jane Addams School are very helpful for the people on the West Side. We usually don't have fresh vegetables, so this really benefits the community. But the best part is that the food comes from the children from the West Side, working together to provide for the West Side.



The West Side Freedom Festival included traditional dancing, music, singing, poetry, and face painting to highlight the struggle for freedom.

Key Lesson: Relationships Must Flourish

The interviews suggest that members of Jane Addams School were pleased, for the most part, with their involvement in the school. When we analyzed the reasons why people are participating and what they value about their participation, we learned with new urgency and depth the importance of Jane Addams School being a hospitable and safe place.

We began this evaluation with two questions about the importance of universities working *with*, not *for* communities, and the ways in which residents and college students jointly define problems and solutions. At the center of the answer to these questions is what members consider the soul of the school: relationships. As one of the

college students interviewed said, “The most important creation of Jane Addams School has been the community of relationships that has developed among the participants.” Participants told us that to have the most impact, relationships had to be consistent and ongoing. In order for universities to work *with* rather than *for* communities, it is paramount that effort be put into nurturing consistent, long-lasting relationships.

The importance of consistent, ongoing, reciprocal relationships was discerned as essential for community-university partnerships. For example, in areas like the one-on-one learning pairs, the interviews revealed dissatisfaction

with current practices at the school. People noted that when the learning pairs are consistent, one-on-one learning works well. When the pairs are not consistent, it works less well or not at all. Hmong adults commented:

Consistency is the best. I worked with a different person each time before working with [the same college student]. With other teachers, I didn't understand as well. With [the same college student], I understood—it might be the way he teaches—but I think it's easier to understand each other when you work with the same person each week.

I like the one-on-one approach. But is often difficult to understand my partner if I am working with a person I hadn't

worked with before. New people often ask questions which are not related to where I left off the time before.

College students confirmed the need for consistency:

I also get to know her life. . . . That contributes to the sense of being relaxed. You can respond to them as people because you see other aspects of their life. I can see how hard they must work. . . . If you don't work with the same person, you don't understand the daily things that happen.

The main obstacle to longer term, consistent learning pairs is that college students tend to come to Jane Addams School in connection with a course and to leave when the course is over. We are currently working on ways to encourage long-term involvement for college students, including offering work-study stipends and connecting more faculty and courses to the work at the school. Another approach to foster continuity is for the learning pairs to keep portfolios that track each evening's progress and challenges. We believe these portfolios can both improve the work of consistent pairs and help a new learning partner pick up more effectively where the previous one left off.

From our interviews, we learned that in order to create safe, democratic spaces, community members and college students must be given the opportunity to develop consistent, ongoing, and multidimensional relationships. Neighborhood residents were especially adamant about not wanting one time programs; rather, community members desire an ongoing partnership of sustained dialogue with the colleges and universities to create new knowledge and address community issues. In this type of sustained dialogue, the relationships put an emphasis on working *with*, rather than *doing for*; as a result, democratic spaces flourish.

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