

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

LESSONS ON CIVIC EDUCATION FROM THE PAST AND PRESENT

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The cultivation of democracy in the United States has traditionally and predominately been linked to educational institutions. But, should schools be the only groups responsible for civic education?

A new CIRCLE Working Paper by Nicholas Longo suggests that relying solely on educational institutions to create active citizens is harmful to both education and democracy. Dr. Longo concludes civic education should reach beyond the schools into communities and community institutions.

The research is based on a historical and ethnographic case-study analysis of three community organizations that were able to provide rich models of community learning. The three organizations studied are: Hull House in Chicago, the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, and the Neighborhood Learning Community in St. Paul, Minnesota. The complete findings can be found in "CIRCLE Working Paper 30: Recognizing the Role of Community in Civic Education: Lessons from Hull House, Highlander Folk School, and the Neighborhood Learning Community" which can be downloaded from http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/working_papers.htm.

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING

The author describes three models of community-based learning in which community organizations provided civic learning. First, Hull House, began by Jane Addams in the late 19th century, used community-based learning in order to promote democracy. Jane Addams started Hull House as "a protest against a restricted view of education." Hull House was not a school but a "settlement" or neighborhood institution built for and by new immigrants. It addressed pressing social and political issues of the time, including the corruption of elected officials, child labor, labor organizing, arts education, war and peace, treatment of new Americans, and the need for sanitary streets.

Next, the Highlander Folk School, established in 1932 by Myles Horton under Addams' direct influence, linked education and social change. The school was instrumental in many social movements, serving as a training center, gathering place, and partner for union organizers and both blacks and whites in the Civil Rights Movement. Lastly, the author reviews the Neighborhood Learning

Community (NLC), which began in St. Paul in 2001. The NLC was largely inspired by the democratic traditions of Hull House and Highlander and works to cultivate the link between community-learning and civic engagement.

LESSONS LEARNED

The research highlights several lessons learned from these three cases. First, educators must realize that change takes time and commit accordingly. Horton spent 58 years at Highlander; Addams spent 46 years at Hull House. Educators should also consider all the institutions that educate for democracy, including schools, colleges, universities, community centers, non-profits, libraries, museums, retreat centers, local businesses and other models of traditional schooling. Additionally, the author suggests that emphasis must be placed on the relevancy of people's own everyday experiences. The author notes, "People are the experts of their own stories; they also are best able to solve their own problems. The iron rule of community organizing applies to community-based civic learning: never do for others what they can do for themselves."

Other lessons for educators include the importance of using a community-learning approach, respecting cultural, gender, age and racial differences and creating ways for diverse people to contribute to solving public problems; the value of incorporating and utilizing the talents and instincts of non-professionals and ordinary citizens; the need for reciprocal relations among individuals who learn and teach one another; and the importance of flexibility and trust in an ever-changing democratic process.

The research concludes that civic education can not be successfully provided in isolation. According to the author, "The powerful stories and lessons from Hull House, Highlander, and the Neighborhood Learning Community make clear—in very different contexts—that 'community matters' for civic learning. Put simply, we cannot do civic education in isolation." As such, the role of community must be recognized and included in the educational process. In addition, community-based learning must be connected to civic outcomes in order to effectively produce active citizens. ■