The Problem of Time: Enabling Students to Make Long-Term Commitments to Community-Based Learning

John Wallace
University of Minnesota

Community organizations often see students coming to work only for the period of a single service-learning course. This pattern of rapid turnover in students’ community-based work and learning has costs for both the work and the learning. This paper tells the story of efforts over a period of four years to solve this problem in the partnership between the Jane Addams School for Democracy and two higher education institutions. The promising and successful strategies which this partnership has discovered for keeping students involved for longer periods have two dimensions: first, to the extent possible lower academic and financial barriers to students’ participation, and second, foster a community of students who see themselves as living their ideals of social justice. These strategies are adaptable to other settings.

Colleges and communities structure time differently. They endeavor to engage the attention and effort of their members on schedules that are responsive to different needs and values. These differences create tensions and challenges in service-learning partnerships between colleges and community organizations. Roughly speaking, community organizations face a problem of molding into a coherent and continuing unity the capacities of student volunteers which the college calendar and the college curriculum tend to chop into fragments. I call this the “problem of time” in service-learning partnerships.

In this paper I tell and draw lessons from the story of how one campus-community service-learning partnership—the Jane Addams School for Democracy in partnership with the University of Minnesota and the College of St. Catherine—has experienced and responded to this problem. In the first section, I give a general characterization of the problem. In Section Two, I recount how the Jane Addams School began, including its initial strategy for solving the problem. In Section Three, I tell how the School evolved and how its initial strategy for solving the problem failed. And in the final section, I review the lessons the School learned from the failure and its new strategy for solving it.

The Problem of Short Stays in the Community

Let me begin with an anecdote that Herman Blake tells about Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School. The Highlander Folk School is an adult education center, located in Tennessee, which was founded in the 1930’s by Horton and two colleagues, Don West and James Dombrowski. It played an important supportive role in movements for social justice in the South—the industrial union movement of the 1930’s and the civil rights movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s. Rosa Parks participated in a two-week workshop at Highlander in the summer of 1955; she refused to give up her seat on the bus in December 1955 (See Horton, 1997). In the late 1960’s Herman Blake was on the faculty of the University of California at Santa Cruz and was looking for good internship opportunities for students. Blake had worked in the civil rights movement, had been at Highlander, knew Horton and knew of Highlander’s involvement working with communities on environmental issues. He asked Horton, then the Executive Director of Highlander, if students from Santa Cruz could come and do internships at Highlander. “Yes,” Horton replied, “we will be glad to have them, provided that they stay with us for two years.”

Two years, otherwise, forget it and stay home!

What would lead a community-centered organization to take this stance? From the point of view of a community organization, how does the prospect look of having student volunteers?

For most community organizations that partner with colleges and universities in service-learning, the presence of students is a decidedly mixed blessing. On the positive side, the students constitute a large pool of volunteers, many of them highly motivated, who bring new energy, viewpoints and ideas to the organization. On the negative side, the students tend to stay in their service jobs for only the ten to fifteen weeks of the service-learning course. The student leaves the organization just as he or she is coming to understand its mission and philosophy and is becoming competent and comfortable in helping with its work. When the next quarter or semester rolls around, the organization has to orient and train
a whole new group of student workers.

Another negative is that students may come to the community organization expecting to apply, in some direct way, what they are learning in the service-learning course that brings them to the setting. Trying out an academic theory is then students’ main interest. They are in the setting only through the screen of the theory. What a community organization needs, in contrast to this narrow presence, is for students to be fully present as whole persons to the full complexity of the organization and its people. Often the two negatives of short time and narrow presence reinforce each other.

Some organizations try to defend against the rapid turnover of students by requiring a commitment to stay involved for a minimum period, e.g., for a year. It is not a secret that students in a service-learning course may sign these contracts, with the best of intentions, and yet find, when the service-learning course is over, that their motivation and ability to fulfill the rest of the commitment fades.

Community organizations, therefore, are forced to think twice before choosing to take part in service-learning partnerships. If an organization is to accept students from service-learning courses, it has to figure out a way to reduce to manageable size the disruptive effects of the rapid turnover. There are basically two strategies for doing this. One strategy is to accept the rapid turnover, and to blunt the disruptive effects by simplifying and narrowing the jobs which students do to such a degree that orientation and training are easy and quick and turnover is not a problem. The second strategy is to find a way to induce students to stay involved after the course is over.

The simplifying-narrowing strategy is not good for anyone. It is not good for the learning side of the service-learning equation because students learn the least from doing jobs that are routine and boring and involve little complex interaction with people whom the organization serves. It is not good for the community organization side of the equation either because it creates in the whole organization an atmosphere of low morale emanating from a group of students who are merely completing the required, mercifully short, time in a boring job. In fact, it is extremely difficult to create and supervise “simple and narrow” jobs in such a way that they are performed with useable quality. Even though no one likes or wants it, it is important to name this strategy, because organizations may find themselves unintentionally slipping into it under the pressure of rapid student turnover. Thus faculty hear complaints from students such as, “All I did was file... I finished the filing in fifteen minutes, and then there was nothing to do, so I just sat.”

What are the prospects for the second strategy—finding a way to induce a significant proportion of the service-learning students to stay involved after the course is over? This is the question I want to explore by recounting the experience of the Jane Addams School for Democracy in its partnership with the University of Minnesota.

The Beginnings of the Jane Addams School

The Jane Addams School for Democracy is a community-based education and action center located in Neighborhood House, a 100-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, the University of Minnesota, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute, and Neighborhood House. The Jane Addams School is based on an approach to learning in which everyone is perceived as a contributor and as 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.

I want to give a fuller story of the School to highlight its encounter with the problem of students tending to stay for too short a time. But first I need to say a word about where I stand in relation to the School. In the summer of 1996 a small group of which I was a member met weekly at Neighborhood House to create a vision and a philosophy for a new community-based learning and action initiative which would be linked to local colleges and universities. The Jane Addams School grew out of the conversations of this group. At the beginning of the summer, I had both feet firmly planted in my job as a professor in the philosophy department at the University of Minnesota. At the end of the summer, I had one foot in the University as a professor and one foot in the Jane Addams School as a community educator. That is the way it has been ever since. I have been fully involved in the day-to-day work of the School, as well as in the planning, governance, and fund-raising for it. When students come to the School they find me working shoulder to shoulder with them.

Four senior people from that visioning summer of 1996 have continued to have an oversight role and responsibility to hold the vision of the School: Nan Skelton from the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota, Nan Kari from the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs, Sandra Fuller from Neighborhood House, and myself. When I use the word “we” in what follows, I am referring to the views and ideas of this group.

The School started in the fall of 1996, and was
built on four foundational commitments and ideas that had grown out of the summer’s work. One of these “four pillars” was a solution to the problem of time in service-learning, or what we then thought was a solution. To give this pillar the proper context, I put it third below.

First, inspired by two historical examples of places which led democratic community-building and social change work—Jane Addams and Hull House, and Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School—we wanted to create democratic spaces that had two characteristics (See Addams, 1998 & Horton, 1997). First, they should be spaces of hospitality in which people felt safe and free to be creative and to be themselves, and that cultivated relationships. And second, they should be spaces infused with a spirit of equality, without hierarchies of authority or knowledge, where choices about what to learn and how to learn it, what to do and how to do it, would be discussed and decided on by those affected by the choice. We have come to call these safe spaces “learning circles.” We believed that if we could work with people to create safe spaces where people can talk about their dreams and the issues they face and decide together what they will do, programs and actions will follow naturally.

Second, we had a good idea of what the focus of the first learning circle should be. During the summer of planning, we had several meetings with neighborhood groups to share with them the vision we were crafting and to get their ideas about it. In these meetings, we always began by asking two questions, “What would you like to learn?” and “Would you be interested in learning alongside college students?”

Residents’ responses to the first question identified several specific topic areas for learning exchange circles, including language learning in Hmong, Spanish, and English, immigration and welfare reform, rights in the workplace, people of the West Side, and combining the learning of English and American institutions and culture—and that college students and professors also could learn a good deal from them, about their cultures and about their experiences of American life.

Based on these responses, we felt confident in making the topic of the first Jane Addams School learning circle the exchange of languages and cultures. Our goal was to offer Native Hmong speakers and Spanish speakers an opportunity to improve their English, and native English speakers an opportunity to improve their Spanish or their Hmong. In this way there would be sharing of cultures all around.

The third pillar was a strategy for dealing with the problem of time in service-learning. It is worth emphasizing here that each of the senior planners for the School had had at least ten years experience with service-learning, either from the faculty side, the community organization side, or both. We had seen first hand the difficulties I summarized in the first section of this paper—students languishing in boring jobs, community partners worried about the quality of their programs being compromised by too many inexperienced service-learners, and children in tutoring programs being held back by the need to shift from tutor to tutor. So, we tried to find a solution to this problem in the consultations with community residents during the summer of planning.

In the course of the conversation with neighborhood residents about college students serving as partners in the activities of the School, we raised explicitly the question of rapid student turnover. We told residents that because students have complex schedules and multiple obligations, many would be at the School for only 10 or 15 weeks. The students would participate actively for a definite but relatively short period. Then they would leave, and new students would replace them. How did community residents feel about this? The response was immediate and unanimous. “This is not a problem. We will welcome the students when they first come, and we will have a good-bye celebration, a party, to thank them when they leave.” The planners were of course very relieved and pleased to hear this response.

The fourth pillar we began with was a philosophy about funding. The Jane Addams School began with no funding at all—no paid staff, no supply budget, nothing beyond what participants contributed. This was intentional. The founders group did not want to make the kind of commitment to a pre-conceived plan that would have been necessary to secure funding in advance of starting. It was important to start without preconceptions and let it grow organically from the desires and interactions of the participants. Once things began to emerge and grow in this organic way, the planners expected that is would be possible to secure funding from traditional sources—foundations, private donors, state agencies, and so forth.
Believing that these four pillars gave a secure foundation, we started the Jane Addams School in the fall of 1996 with one learning circle—adult neighborhood residents and college students working in partnership to exchange Hmong, Spanish and English languages and cultures.

**Evolution of the School and Re-Emergence of the Time Problem**

We knew that if the vision I have described were implemented—if such safe and democratic spaces were created and people participated in them—it would be impossible to foresee what the Jane Addams School would be like in two years or even in one. Democratic spaces necessarily generate new initiatives out of the interests and energy of the participants. A democratic school of this kind is not a particular or set of particular program(s) or community initiative(s). Rather, it is a second-level capacity to respond to desires on the part of neighborhood residents to work on something, to learn about something or to get something done about a problem—and to respond in such a way that neighborhood residents and people from the various cooperating organizations work together in a spirit of reciprocity, equality and trust.

But we discovered that our assumption that we would solve the problem of time in service-learning by having clear expectations on all sides that college students would cycle through the School on a 10 week or 15 week schedule has proved to be seriously mistaken. What we have come to understand is that in all of the activities which the Jane Addams School has come to sponsor, multidimensional reciprocal relationships—friendships, to use the ordinary word for it—among the participants in the School have proved to be fundamental. In the language circles, languages are exchanged and cultures shared by conversations sometimes in pairs, sometimes in small groups, sometimes in the “big circle” of the group as a whole. In the Children’s Circle, the college students and the children get to know each other and the reading, crafts games, story-telling occur in the context of friendships. These friendly relationships can be built up over a period of two quarters or semesters or more. Their importance for the work of the School is something that was discovered not just by the organizers of the School, but by all of the participants, neighborhood residents and college students, in a process of gradual dawning. No one had anticipated the fundamental role that friendship would have in making the work of the school possible.

Let me review three pieces of concrete evidence that helped lead us to this new understanding.

One evening a year and a half after the Jane Addams School began, a dozen college students were completing their spring semester’s work in the Hmong Circle and—exactly according to the original plan—the Circle was having a celebration to honor and thank the students. A neighborhood resident asked the students what they were planning to do during the summer and several students said, in response, how great it was to have no school for a while. At which point several of the Hmong members of the Circle called out, “Good, then you can keep coming to Jane Addams and you can come every evening!” This was said in a basically friendly and jovial spirit, but also with an edge.

A second piece of evidence of the importance of friendships at the Jane Addams School was the realization that a significant minority of college students was staying for a year or more. The depth of learning and growth for these students and the contributions they made to the School were greater than occurred with the short-term students. The School has shown a great capacity to generate new programs and activities, including a homework group, a story group, the earth day club and the team boyz club, a summer farm and garden project, a pandau weaving project and a bicycle recovery and repair group. Every one of these new initiatives sprang from long term relationships among parents, children and college students.

The third piece of evidence about the problem of time came from an evaluation of the School that was carried out in the summer of 1998. Let me quote one of the key findings of this evaluation.

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. Here are some comments from Hmong adults:

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.

College students confirmed this point.

I developed a relationship with a Hmong learner and saw the benefits of consistency over
time. I didn’t want to bail on that. I saw how hard she was trying. And I respected her effort by returning the effort.

I also get to know her life—like getting to know [a Hmong parent’s] kids. 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. (Longo & Wallace, 2000)

This and other evidence made it clear to us that for the Jane Addams School to reach its full potential, we needed to find a way for college students to stay at the School for at least a year and, ideally, for a significant proportion to stay for two years or more.

This learning raises the further question: What proportion of the students do we need to stay longer than a semester? Obviously, any approach to a university/community partnership must leave room for a flow of students, and, for that matter, a flow of community residents, through the spaces the partnership creates. We find that community residents are staying at the Jane Addams School for periods ranging from a few months to four years (some community residents have been participating since the beginning of the school in 1996). On the other hand, if we assume that every student were to stay for two years, or four semesters, and that students entered and left at the semester break in an even flow, in any given semester one-fourth of the students would be new. So, what proportion do we need to stay? We have good experience that throws light on this question. In some semesters we have had roughly half of the students new to Jane Addams, the rest having been there for a semester or more. When this has happened we have seen a critical mass phenomenon—when there is a critical mass of continuing participants, the existing relationships of confidence and trust can quickly expand to include a proportionate number of new people, whether college students or community residents. In the adult learning circles, the confidence needed to be creative in the one-on-one language learning situations spreads naturally from an experienced pair to the new pair working next to them. In the children’s circle, relationships that the continuing students have with the children spread in an analogous way. We believe that the critical mass we need is for half the students in any semester to have been at Jane Addams for at least one semester, and for a smaller group of student leaders to have been there for a year or more. This yeasty sea of ongoing productive friendships buoy up the new students. It supports and quickens their growth in confidence and their making of friendly connections.

In coming to be at home in the democratic spaces at the Jane Addams School, students undergo a transformation that is intensely personal. No one can do it for them. No one can tell them how to do it. It involves growing into an attitude and an openness that cannot be taught, but can be “caught” in the right environment. To convey a concrete sense of this kind of transformation, let me quote from the journal of a student who worked in the Hmong Circle at the Jane Addams School.

When addressing the question, what is good learning, I will definitely say that good learning involves good relationships. Being able to look someone in the eye and understand what kind of a day they are having. Adapting your “lesson plan” to the needs of your student, to their mood, and to their level of motivation for the day. Also, not just looking at your student as a student, but as a friend, as a person you can talk to and learn as much from them as you give to them... When I first started tutoring the Hmong adults, I was more aggressive, taking more of the lead, and as time went by, I learned how to ask more questions and to get more feedback as to where they wanted to go with the learning process. This was somewhat difficult for me to adapt to at first, because so much of my past learning was directed right at me.

Steps toward a Solution of the Time Problem

At the same time that we were going through the painful process of learning that the Jane Addams School was not going to flourish if a large proportion of college students who came to work did so for only one semester, we began to notice that some students did stay for a year or two or even three. When we talked with these students about what drew them to stay and analyzed what might underlie their persistence, we identified eight factors.²

1. Service-learning courses deeply resonate with the philosophy and approach of the Jane Addams School. Many of the students who persisted had come to Jane Addams initially as part of a service-learning course which had two features: (a) it was on a topic that was closely related to the philosophy and basic democratic approach of the Jane Addams School and (b) its pedagogy reflected the same democratic, participatory approach used at the Jane Addams School. These students had an in-depth understanding of the mission of the School—what its philosophy and aims were—not only because they were exposed to democratic education as a topic they had read and talked about but also because they had experienced it in the classroom.
2. An array of additional course linkages to the Jane Addams School was possible. Many students who persisted found other courses to take in subsequent semesters which both fit with their academic program and which they could link to their on-going involvement at the Jane Addams School. In some cases, the courses they found were service-learning courses which gave students the option of doing the service component of the course at the Jane Addams School. In other cases, the student would simply approach the professor of a course they needed or wanted to take and say, “I am working at the Jane Addams School and would like to find a way of connecting my work there with the learning, thinking, and writing I do in your course; can you help me find a way to do this?” Sometimes the further linkage with the student’s academic program would take other forms, such as through a theme or case study in a senior thesis or a master’s thesis.

3. Participation in the governance of the Jane Addams School. Most of the students who persisted took part in the on-going governance, problem-solving and planning of the School. Since its inception, all members of the learning circles—adults, children, high school students, college students—have been invited to come to a weekly gathering to take part in identifying and responding to challenges and opportunities facing the School. Consistently these meetings have had 12 to 20 participants over the School’s four years of operation, in addition to the four founders. We observed that most of the college students who persisted for more than a year had at some point during that first year become regular and active participants in these governance meetings.

4. University teachers with one foot in the university and one foot in the Jane Addams School. From the beginning of the Jane Addams School, two University teachers—two of the four founders of the School—have taught service-learning courses linked with the School and have been intensively involved in the daily work of the School. One of these teachers, Nan Skelton, the Associate Director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, teaches courses on Youth and Community Development in the Youth Studies Department; the other, John Wallace, a professor in the Philosophy Department, teaches courses on the philosophy of democratic education and on social justice and community service. These teachers have one foot in the University and one foot in the Jane Addams School. They work with their students in the classroom, in the meetings, and in the learning circles at the Jane Addams School. Most of the students who persisted for more than a year had taken courses with one or both of these teachers.

5. Paying students for increased involvement. After a year or so of participation, some students were paid for further, deepened participation through work-study or foundation grant funds. These students took on leadership roles in the learning circles, with responsibilities for planning agendas and activities, developing learning materials, and doing research on questions arising in the circles that was brought back to the group. These responsibilities required a time commitment of ten or more hours per week, as compared to the standard three hours per week for students from the service-learning courses.

6. Students moving from one learning circle to another. Some students who persisted for more than a year moved from the learning circle in which they had started and stayed for several months to another learning circle. This movement occurred in all directions e.g., a student might start in one of the adult circles, then move to the children’s circle, or vice versa. This is made possible, and even natural, by the regular evening reflection time that brings together students from all the circles. Thus a student might naturally say at some point, “I would like to try this different circle now.” While it might seem that this would be disruptive and should not be considered as persistence, in small doses this movement actually increases the depth of relationships as well as enhances a collective sense of connection among the circles. For example, a student who has worked in one of the adult circles and moves to the children’s circle will find that he or she knows the parents of some of the children. The freedom to move gives students a chance to get to know the School in all its parts, and to find themselves and the work they most love to do.

7. Alignment with students’ passion for justice. Most of the students who persist see the Jane Addams School as a place to act on their ideals and their desires to build a more just society. The students who persist talk openly about this and about how happy they are to have found a place to be thus engaged. They seek out the experience of being engaged, with peers and teachers, in a cause greater than themselves, and working in a way that builds their capacities to continue to be engaged in such work in the future. The students who persist are hungry for this kind of engagement with the world.

8. A community of workers for justice. The “with peers and teachers” part of the last point deserves emphasis. A year or so after the Jane Addams School began, we noticed that a community of students was forming, united by their passion to be active in building a better society and by their concrete practical work together at the Jane Addams School. For the students in this community, their involvement at Jane Addams was coming to mean
far more than their time at the School. It was a shared passion for the work and a sense of community that was a “home base” for their experience not only as students but as human beings in the world at this time in their lives. The teachers who had one foot in the University and one foot at Jane Addams were part of this community, but only to a limited extent. This community of students connected with, but also were separate from, the teachers.

These various factors probably reinforce each other in many ways. For example, the deep understanding of democratic education and community building that the students get from the courses that exemplify the “how” of democratic education as well as the “what” and the “why,” give students the confidence that they know what the School is all about. They then feel comfortable taking part in the governance meetings. This helps to build a sense of community among the students, and the issues raised in the governance meetings can fruitfully be pursued at greater length later at the coffee shop. The students then learn from each other about courses and professors with which they can link their academic work and their work at Jane Addams.

The factors that lengthen and deepen students’ commitment are grounded in two underlying themes: (a) reducing time barriers to students’ involvement and (b) aligning students’ passion for justice and a sense of community with the courses they take and the work they do in the community. Let me expand on these themes:

*Lowering Time Barriers.* Students have a lot to do: they take several courses at a time, work at a job to pay for college, and often have personal and family commitments. So anything that can be done to combine and integrate a student’s service into these already other activities will help students persist in a service setting. For example, being able to connect their academic to their work at the School makes staying there a more integrated and efficient use of time than if the Jane Addams involvement were separate and detached from students’ educational involvements. Similarly, a student being paid for his or her work at Jane Addams may mean that the student now no longer has to work at another job.

*Engaging Students’ Passion for Justice and a Sense of Community.* Aligning both the curriculum—what is learned and how it is learned—and the mission and philosophy of the service setting with students’ passion to be engaged in cooperative work with peers and teachers to build a more decent society can deepen students’ commitment to this work. Many students want to be involved in building a better society, involved in a way that builds their capacity for further work of the same kind and involved in the work with a community of like-minded peers and teachers. Aligning the curriculum and the service setting with this torrent of students’ motivation mobilizes the greatest positive force for their persistence in the setting.

The founders of the Jane Addams School have been fortunate in being able to create the School from scratch, and for two of us, in having one foot in the community and one foot in the University. We have been able to work at least to some degree both sides of the street, to design and adjust both curriculum and the community-based service-learning setting to pick up on the eight factors we noticed were inducing students to stay involved. We have a good deal of freedom to learn from the eight factors and to give greater expression to the two underlying themes both on the side of the University and its curriculum and on the side of the Jane Addams School.

To build on what we have learned over these five years, we are taking the following four concrete steps.

First, I have established and teach a course dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the theory and practice of the Jane Addams School. This course has run three times. Entitled “Education and Social Change,” it is given at the 4000 level, meaning that it is available to graduate students and to upper-level and other qualified undergraduates. It is a semester course that, because it makes a larger claim on students’ time than a standard course, carries six credits, twice the number that 4000 level courses normally carry. It is, in effect, a double course, and has three components: a core seminar which meets 3 hours per week; a weekly *practicum* consisting of participation in one of the learning circles at the Jane Addams School; and a *studio* in which students work on their own and in teams to design and carry out creative projects which contribute to the work of the School.

Second, we are in the process of establishing a group of *Faculty Associates of the Jane Addams School,* with members making a commitment to link one or more courses to the School, to visit the School in semesters when they have students working there, and to participate in two Associates meetings per year. It is hoped that this group will accomplish two things. First, it will create a loose network of service-learning courses, taught by faculty who are knowledgeable about the work of the school, which, in some cases, will introduce students to the Jane Addams School, and in other cases serve as a possible site. The courses will be from a range of disciplines related to the work of the School, such as linguistics, anthropology, geography, history, English, theater, child development, sociology, political science, family social science, Spanish, philosophy and others. And second, it will create a faculty
Wallace

cadre that will seek to bring additional faculty into regular and in-depth participation at the School.

Third, we are establishing a College House on the West Side of St. Paul where some of the students from the University who are working and providing leadership at the Jane Addams School will actually live alongside the parents and children who participate in the School. The College House will be a place of hospitality for the neighborhood and a place where some meetings and activities that grow out of the relationships with neighbors will take place. In the early days of the settlement house movement, it was common for college students to live in these houses. University of Minnesota students lived at Neighborhood House in the 1920’s, and College House represents a return to that tradition. Obviously, in seeking to establish College House, the Jane Addams School is building on the discovery that a community of committed college students is a powerful force for enabling students to have long-term involvement in the School.

Fourth, we have established within the Jane Addams School a new infrastructure of small groups, both within the learning circles and linking the learning circles, which are led by student learning circle couches. The responsibilities of these positions will require a commitment of ten hours work per week. Students filling these positions will be paid, and will be required to have at least six month’s prior experience at the School.

There is one additional step about which we have just begun to brainstorm. We envision the possibility of a new kind of service-learning course in which the teacher or teachers and all the students are taking part in the same learning circle, and where the overarching purpose of the course is to be responsive to the full range of learning and action that emerge. Peter Maurin (1960, p.11) writes in one of his “easy essays:”

As teachers of subjects, college professors may enable people to master subjects, but mastering subjects has never enabled anyone to master situations.

In Maurin’s terms, the purpose of such a service-learning course would be for the students and the teacher to move toward mastery of the situation presented by the particular learning circle over a particular stretch of time. Ideally, the length of time would be a year, but one semester would be a good start. Joseph K. Hart (1927, p. 149), an early advocate of the importance of the example of the Danish folk high schools for American education, wrote that the teachers in the kind of American school that he envisioned would need to be “men and women who are capable of learning, and who can teach, not so much by their teaching, as by their capacity to learn.” He goes on: “America’s great lack, at present, is the lack of persons of this sort. We have plenty of men and women who can teach what they know; we have very few who can teach their own capacity to learn.” The teachers in courses we dream of creating, designed to be totally responsive to and to build mastery of, the situations engendered in the live democratic spaces at the Jane Addams School, will need to be teachers of the sort Hart had in mind.

These five concrete, manageable steps will go a long way toward giving us the necessary mix of long-term and short-term student involvement so that the philosophy of the School may flourish.

Conclusion

If the strategies described in this paper are worked with full imagination and a measure of luck, will the problem of time in service-learning be solved? Not completely, because of the structural disharmony between the university’s chopped up calendar and longer-term human rhythms found in community-based work. The best that can be hoped for is that a significant proportion, roughly half or more, of the students at any one time will have been in the Jane Addams setting for more than a semester. The hope is that this will happen and that it will be enough. We know that if it does, the benefits for the college students and for the children and adults in the circles will be great. Such an experience—of being part of a diverse and vibrant community, and of helping something grow to be more fully itself, not by applying a preset rule or plan, but by being sensitive and responsive to the human interests and potential that continuously arise in such a community—is most uncommon in the service-learning community.

Notes

I am grateful to colleagues, students and residents of St. Paul’s West Side neighborhood who have been partners in the creation of the Jane Addams School for Democracy, where ideas about how social change can occur and how learning should be have come to life with vibrancy and power beyond my dreams.

1 Herman Blake told me this story in a conversation at the Campus Compact Institute on Integrating Service with Academic Study at Stanford University in the Summer of 1991.

2 In describing these factors the words “most,” “many,” and “some” are used intentionally. Each factor articulates a more or less strong trend, but not a universal rule. For each student who persisted for more than a year, at least three of the factors held true.
The Problem of Time in Service-Learning

References


Author

JOHN WALLACE is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Minnesota. He helped found, and served as the first chair of, the Invisible College, a national group of educators who are working to link universities and students with communities. He is the recipient of the 2000 Campus Compact Thomas Ehrlich Faculty Award for Service-Learning, the University of Minnesota 2000 Josie R. Johnson Human Rights and Social Justice Award, and the Minnesota Campus Compact 2000 Sister Pat Kowalski Leadership Award.