



Why Community Matters: Connecting Education with Civic Life.

Longo, Nicholas V.

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In his latest work, *Why Community Matters: Connecting Education with Civic Life*, Nicholas V. Longo seeks to create a more holistic view of school learning by revitalizing the notion of community participation in education. A holistic learning environment is that which encourages learning for its own sake and for the whole development of the citizen. Learning community programs address a variety of social issues such as increasing social fragmentation and the alienation of community members from civic participation and engagement.

By placing an emphasis on interpersonal communication, relationship-building, and experiential learning within an environment of diversity, these learning programs aim to heal a deteriorating sense of community connection. They also allow participants to relate their personal learning experience to wider local and global issues. Ideally, the community learning environment engages students and educators in learning to develop self-sufficiency within cooperative relationships while helping develop the confidence of citizens in reaching beyond—yet building upon—the purely personal and local. Nevertheless, the comprehensive, holistic learning classroom is student-centered and starts with the needs of the individual.

Longo explains in his preface that “schools are essential for the civic growth of children, but inadequate to the educational equation. Communities must also be educative” (xi). In other words, “schools cannot educate in isolation” (p. 3). Longo joins other activist educators in highlighting that learning is most effective when it is grounded on a pedagogy which enables people, individually and together, to grow as human beings through building their communities. For this to occur, it is imperative to develop the communicative essence of relationships, as

“Relationships are at the core of educating for democracy” (p. xi). The need for educational sites that integrate pedagogy and community is critically necessary today, in Longo’s view, in order to fight back the growing tide creating “a nation of spectators,” who passively consume public life rather than act politically as engaged citizens (p. 8). That is, for democracy to grow and succeed in contemporary society, we need to find effective ways to connect ideals of hope and education to community organizers, young people and educators from all walks of life.

What makes Longo’s work particularly useful is that he effectively illuminates the connections between [Neighborhood Learning Community](#) of Minnesota, and its roots in Hull House settlement and [Highlander Folk School](#), two historic community-based learning sites. The latter programs offered opportunities to teach literacy and communicative skills, such as reading and writing, as well as in the case of immigrants, to speak English and help with acculturation. The community-based learning centers studied also offer road maps to vigorous ways to integrate interdisciplinary ideas and offer a space for civic engagement and democracy. Partnerships between educators, students and the communities are strengthened as these organizations work to develop and maintain learning communities. Moreover, such programs are a relatively low cost method for accomplishing all of the learning dynamics mentioned above.

Hull House, founded by Jane Addams as an educational settlement, served a diverse immigrant population and offered a place for the exchange of knowledge and ideas among different social classes for the purpose of bridging class divisions. The [Highlander Folk School](#), born in 1930’s Tennessee, aimed at the educational and economic betterment of laborers and African-Americans, and played an important role in the political and racial developments in the South. [The Neighborhood Learning Community](#) was born of the joint efforts of people and community organizations in the West Side neighborhood of St. Paul, Minnesota, interested in strengthening learning, fostering a culture of learning, and helping create engaged citizens. By discovering the shared underpinnings of these three learning sites—Hull House, The [Highlander Folk School](#) and the [Neighborhood Learning Community](#)—Longo creates an inspirational road map for educators and activists, and provides, as well, compelling arguments and numerous practical strategies with which to integrate education, community and civic integration in diverse communities. It is, overall, a timely and much-needed call for action.