

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING
IN SOCIAL STUDIES OR LANGUAGE ARTS

Hull House

Living Democracy in the Progressive Era

Resource Book

Compiled by
Shelagh A. Gallagher



Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

Writings of Hull House Residents

Selections in this section are written by the women who lived and worked at Hull House: Jane Addams, Ellen Gates Starr, Florence Kelley, Alice Hamilton, and Julia Lathrop. Each woman influenced not only the impoverished neighborhood, but also state and national policies.

The articles in this section address each of the proposals introduced to students during Problem Engagement. Three of the segments come from Hull House Maps and Papers, the seminal census of Chicago's 19th district, a landmark in social science research. Students study the maps from that work during Inquiry and Investigation. Other articles are retrospective but refer back to problems encountered in the neighborhood at the time.

Most of the articles have been edited to keep them a reasonable length for the middle school-aged child. Some articles offer opportunity for additional analysis, especially the article by Julia Lathrop, which includes statistics related to juvenile incarceration.

Students should not be required to read all of the passages. Rather, students should share responsibilities for finding information about different aspects of the problem, read the articles relevant to the question they are pursuing, and then share what they find with each other.

Excerpt from *First Days at Hull House*

by Jane Addams

...Our first guest was an interesting young woman who lived in a neighboring tenement, whose widowed mother aided her in the support of the family by scrubbing a downtown theater every night. The mother, of English birth, was well bred and carefully educated, but was in the midst of that bitter struggle which awaits so many strangers in American cities who find that their social position tends to be measured solely by the standards of living they are able to maintain. Our guest has long since married the struggling young lawyer to whom she was then engaged, and he is now leading his profession in an eastern city. She recalls that month's experience always with a sense of amusement over the fact that the succession of visitors who came to see the new Settlement invariably questioned her most minutely concerning "these people" without once suspecting that they were talking to one who had been identified with the neighborhood from childhood. I at least was able to draw a lesson from the incident, and I never addressed a Chicago audience on the subject of the Settlement and its vicinity without inviting a neighbor to go with me, that I might curb any hasty generalization by the consciousness that I had an auditor who knew the conditions more intimately than I could hope to do.

Halsted Street has grown so familiar during twenty years of residence that it is difficult to recall its gradual changes,—the withdrawal of the more prosperous Irish and Germans, and the slow substitution of Russian Jews, Italians, and Greeks. A description of the street such as I gave in those early addresses still stands in my mind as sympathetic and correct.

Halsted Street is thirty-two miles long, and one of the great thoroughfares of Chicago; Polk Street crosses it midway between the stockyards to the south and the shipbuilding yards on the north branch of the Chicago River. For the six miles between these two industries the street is lined with shops of butchers and grocers, with dingy and gorgeous saloons, and pretentious establishments for the sale of ready-made clothing. Polk Street, running west from Halsted Street, grows rapidly more prosperous; running a mile east to State Street, it grows steadily worse, and crosses a network of vice on the corners of Clark Street and Fifth Avenue. Hull House once stood in the suburbs, but the city has steadily grown up around it and its site now has corners on three or four foreign colonies. Between Halsted Street and the river live about ten thousand Italians—Neapolitans, Sicilians, and Calabrians, with an occasional Lombard or Venetian. To the south on Twelfth Street are many Germans, and side streets are given over almost entirely to Polish and Russian Jews. Still farther south, these Jewish colonies merge into a huge Bohemian colony, so vast that Chicago ranks as the third Bohemian city in the world. To the northwest are many Canadian-French, clannish in spite of their long residence in America, and to the north are Irish and first-generation Americans. On the streets directly west and farther north are well-to-do English-speaking families, many of whom own their own houses and have lived in the neighborhood for years; one man is still living in his old farmhouse.

The policy of the public authorities of never taking an initiative, and always waiting to be urged to do their duty, is obviously fatal in a neighborhood where there is little initiative among the citizens. The idea underlying our self-government breaks down in such a ward. The streets are inexpressibly dirty, the number of schools inadequate, sanitary legislation unenforced, the street lighting bad, the paving miserable and altogether lacking in the alleys and smaller streets, and the stables foul beyond description. Hundreds of houses are unconnected with the street sewer. The older and richer inhabitants seem anxious to move away as rapidly as they can afford it. They make room for newly arrived immigrants who are densely ignorant of civic duties. This substitution of the older inhabitants is accomplished industrially also in the south and east quarters of the ward. The Jews and Italians do the finishing for the great clothing manufacturers, formerly done by Americans, Irish, and Germans, who refused to submit to the extremely low prices to which the sweating system has reduced their successors. As the design of the sweating

system is the elimination of rent from the manufacture of clothing, the “outside work” is begun after the clothing leaves the cutter. An unscrupulous contractor regards no basement as too dark, no stable loft too foul, no rear shanty too provisional, no tenement room too small for his workroom, as these conditions imply low rental. Hence these shops abound in the worst of the foreign districts where the sweater easily finds his cheap basement and his home finishers.

The houses of the ward, for the most part wooden, were originally built for one family and are now occupied by several. They are after the type of the inconvenient frame cottages found in the poorer suburbs twenty years ago. Many of them were built where they now stand; others were brought thither on rollers, because their previous sites had been taken by factories. The fewer brick tenement buildings which are three or four stories high are comparatively new, and there are few large tenements. The little wooden houses have a temporary aspect, and for this reason, perhaps, the tenement-house legislation in Chicago is totally inadequate. Rear tenements flourish; many houses have no water supply save the faucet in the back yard; there are no fire escapes; the garbage and ashes are placed in wooden boxes which are fastened to the street pavements. One of the most discouraging features about the present system of tenement houses is that many are owned by sordid and ignorant immigrants. The theory that wealth brings responsibility, that possession entails at length education and refinement, in these cases fails utterly. The children of an Italian immigrant owner may “shine” shoes in the street, and his wife may pick rags from the street gutter, laboriously sorting them in a dingy court. Wealth may do something for her self-complacency and feeling of consequence; it certainly does nothing for her comfort or her children’s improvement nor for the cleanliness of anyone concerned. Another thing that prevents better houses in Chicago is the tentative attitude of the real estate men. Many unsavory conditions are allowed to continue which would be regarded with horror if they were considered permanent. Meanwhile, the wretched conditions persist until at least two generations of children have been born and reared in them.

In every neighborhood where poorer people live, because rents are supposed to be cheaper there, is an element which, although uncertain in the individual, in the aggregate can be counted upon. It is composed of people of former education and opportunity who have cherished ambitions and prospects, but who are caricatures of what they meant to be—“hollow ghosts which blame the living men.” There are times in many lives when there is a cessation of energy and loss of power. Men and women of education and refinement come to live in a cheaper neighborhood because they lack the ability to make money, because of ill health, because of an unfortunate marriage, or for other reasons which do not imply criminality or stupidity. Among them are those who, in spite of untoward circumstances, keep up some sort of an intellectual life; those who are “great for books,” as their neighbors say. To such the Settlement may be a genuine refuge.

Art and Labor

by Ellen Gates Starr

To anyone living in a working-class district of a great city to-day, the question must arise whether it be at all worth the cost to try to perpetuate art under conditions so hopeless, or whether it be not the only rational or even possible course to give up the struggle from that point, and devote every energy to “the purification of the nation’s heart and the chastisement of its life.” Only by re-creation of the source of art can it be restored as a living force. But one must always remember the hungry individual soul which, without it, will have passed unsolaced and unfed, followed by other souls who lack the impulse his should have given. And when one sees how almost miraculously the young mind often responds to what is beautiful in its environment, and rejects what is ugly, it renews courage to set the leaven of the beautiful in the midst of the ugly, instead of waiting for the ugly to be first cleared away.

A child of two drunken parents one day brought to Hull House kindergarten and presented to her teacher a wretched print, with the explanation, “See the Lady Moon.” The Lady Moon, so named in one of the songs the children sing, was dimly visible in an extreme corner of the print otherwise devoted to murder and sudden death; but it was the only thing the child really saw.

The nourishment to life of one good picture to supplant in interest vicious story-papers and posters; of one good song to take the place of vulgar street jingles, cannot, I believe, be estimated or guessed. A good picture for every household seems unattainable until households can produce, or at least select, their own; but certainly a good one in every schoolroom would not be unattainable, if the public should come to regard it as a matter of moment that the rooms in which the children of the land spend their most impressionable days be made beautiful and suggestive, instead of barren and repellent.

Mr. T. C. Horsfall, of Manchester, England, who has developed a system of circulating collections of pictures in the schools of that unhappy city, says that the decision as to whether art shall be used in education is, to modern communities, a decision as to whether the mass of the people shall be barbarian or civilized. Assuredly it has a direct bearing upon the art-producing possibilities of the communities in question.

Let us consider what is the prospect for an “art of the people” in our great cities. And first let us admit that art must be of the people if it is to be at all. We must admit this whether we look into the life of the past or into our own life. If we look to any great national art, that of Athens or of Venice or of Florence, we see that it has not been produced by a few, living apart, fed upon conditions different from the common life; but that it has been, in great part, the expression of that common life. If it has reached higher than the common life, it has done so only by rising through it, never by springing up outside it and apart from it.

This is the fatal mistake of our modern civilization, which is causing it to undo itself and become barbarous in its unloveliness and discord. We have believed that we could force men to live without beauty in their own lives, and still compel them to make for us the beautiful things in which we have denied them any part. We have supposed that we could teach men, in schools, to produce a grace and harmony which they never see, and which the life that we force them to live utterly precludes. Or else we have thought—a still more hopeless error—that they, the workers, the makers, need not know what grace and beauty and harmony are; that artists and architects may keep the secrets, and the builders and makers, not knowing them, can slavishly and mechanically execute what the wise in these mysteries plan.

The results should long ago have taught us our mistake. But only now are we learning, partly from dismal experience of life barren of beauty and variety, and partly from severe but timely teaching from such prophets as Ruskin and Morris, that no man can execute artistically what another man plans, unless the workman’s freedom has been part of the plan. The product of a machine may be useful, and may serve some purposes of information, but can never be artistic. As soon as a machine intervenes between

the mind and its product, a hard, impassable barrier—a non-conductor of thought and emotion—is raised between the speaking and the listening mind. If a man is made a machine, if his part is merely that of reproducing, with mechanical exactness, the design of somebody else, the effect is the same. The more exact the reproduction, the less of the personality of the man who does the work is in the product, the more uninteresting will the product be. A demonstration of how uninteresting this slavish machine-work can become may be found in the carved and upholstered ornamentation of any drawing-room car—one might also say of any drawing-room one enters.

I have never seen in a city anything in the way of decoration upon the house of an American citizen which he had himself designed and wrought for pleasure in it. In the house of an Italian peasant immigrant in our own neighborhood, I have seen wall and ceiling decorations of his own design, and done by his own hand in colors. The designs were very rude, the colors coarse; but there was nothing of the vulgar in it, and there was something of hope. The peasant immigrant's surroundings begin to be vulgar precisely at the point where he begins to buy and adorn his dwelling with the products of American manufacture. What he brings with him in the way of carven bed, wrought kerchief, enamel inlaid picture of saint or angel, has its charm of human touch, and is graceful, however childish.

The peasants themselves secretly prefer their old possessions, but are sustained by a proud and virtuous consciousness of having secured what other people have and what the world approves. A dear old peasant friend of Hull House once conceived the notion that the dignity of his wife—whom he called “my lady”—required that she have a dress in the American mode. Many were the mediatorial struggles which we enacted before this “American dress” was fitted and done. And then, by the mercy of Heaven, her courage gave out, and she never wore it. She found it too uncomfortable, and I know that in her inmost heart she found it too ugly.

Could men build their own houses, could they carve or fresco upon casing, door, or ceiling any decoration which pleased them, it is inconceivable that, under conditions of freedom and happiness, they should refrain from doing so. It is inconceivable that, adorning their own dwellings in the gladness of their hearts, they should not develop something of grace, of beauty, of meaning, in what their hands wrought; impossible that their hands should work on unprompted by heart or brain; impossible then, as inevitable now, that most men's houses should express nothing of themselves save a dull acceptance of things commercially and industrially thrust upon them.

There is one hope for us all,—a new life, a freed life. He who hopes to help art survive on earth till the new life dawns must indeed feed the hungry with good things. This must he do, but not neglect for this the more compassionate and far-reaching aim, the freeing of the art-power of the whole nation and race by enabling them to work in gladness and not in woe. It is a feeble and narrow imagination which holds out to chained hands fair things which they cannot grasp,—things which they could fashion for themselves were they but free.

The soul of man in the commercial and industrial struggle is in a state of siege. He is fighting for his life. It is merciful and necessary to pass in to him the things which sustain his courage and keep him alive, but the effectual thing is to raise the siege.

A settlement, if it is true to its ideal, must stand equally for both aims. It must work with all energy and courage toward the rescue of those bound under the slavery of commerce and the wage-law; with all abstinence it must discountenance wasting human life in the making of valueless things; with all faith it must urge forward the building up of a state in which cruel contrasts of surfeit and want, of idleness and overwork, shall not be found. By holding art and all good fruit of life to be the right of all; by urging all, because of this their common need, to demand time and means for supplying it; by reasonableness in the doing, with others, of useful, wholesome, beneficent work, and the enjoyment, with others, of rightful and sharable pleasure, a settlement should make toward a social state which shall finally supplant this incredible and impious warfare of the children of God.

Whatever joy is to us ennobling; whatever things seem to us made for blessing, and not for weariness and woe; whatever knowledge lifts us out of things paltry and narrowing, and exalts and expands our life; whatever life itself is real and worthy to endure, as there is measure of faith in us, and hope and love and patience, let us live this life. And let us think on our brothers, that they may live it too; for without them we cannot live it if we would; and when we and they shall have this joy of life, then we shall speak from within it, and our speech shall be sweet, and men will listen and be glad. What we do with our hands will be fair, and men shall have pleasure therein. This will be art. Otherwise we cannot all have it; and until all have it in some measure, none can have it in great measure. And if gladness ceases upon the earth, and we turn the fair earth into a prison-house for men with hard and loveless labor, art will die.



15,000 striking garment workers on parade, 1915