

THE CIVIC KNOWLEDGE PROJECT

Grounding Ideas

The Civic Knowledge Project originated from two central ideas, one about the nature of universities, and the other about the social, economic, and political effects of knowledge acquisition and circulation.

(1) A healthy university cultivates the capacities of its students and faculty members to acquire and process information. The relevant capacities include not only the ability to read books and conduct experiments, but also to absorb and process sense data from the physical world or one's immediate environment. Every feature of life at a university should enhance, not reduce, its residents' capacities for information assimilation, including their ability to process sense data.

For the last five decades, the University of Chicago has simultaneously supported its affiliates' development of some of their capacities for knowing the world while also allowing others to atrophy. Specifically, the University has not encouraged affiliates to take in information from their immediate environments and to connect that information to knowledge acquired through academic research. Traditionally, students and faculty at the University of Chicago have been encouraged to read exciting books and to have stimulating conversations, but often also to "not see" the community immediately around them. Habits of "not seeing" have been taught through lessons about how to drive to Hyde Park from other parts of the city, about which businesses in Hyde Park to patronize, about which restaurants to eat in, and about how to avoid strangers. Who has taught these lessons? Most members of the University community who have been residents for longer than a year. And these lessons have been taught, for the most part, innocently or in passing.

That such lessons in "blindness" are typically innocent does not neutralize the effects they have on University and community scholars' capacities to learn. There is evidence that blindness to one's environment can have negative effects on scholarship by corroding

faculties of analysis. Let's take an example from far afield. Scholars who have written histories of Charlotte, N.C., regularly record two facts: first, one of the first prominent white families in Charlotte was the Alexanders; second, the first African-American in city government in Charlotte in the 20th century was an Alexander. No connection is ever drawn between these two facts. Yet at a recent Civic Knowledge Project presentation to a gathering of 500 prominent Charlotte philanthropists the audience acknowledged that there was indeed a connection. As it turns out, Charlotte's history includes the neat historical detail that one early group of settlers, a mix of slave owners and slaves, produced city leaders, both white and black, for two centuries. But the unwillingness of the citizens of Charlotte to see in full the world around themselves, and therefore to see among other things the many connections between white and black citizens, has kept the city's historians from getting their city's history down accurately. Indeed, to be better historians the citizens of Charlotte will need to improve their ability to take in and process information about the present about their environment. To be scholars, they also need to become civic knowers, that is, people who can learn to decipher the structure of their own world just by observing physical, social, and aesthetic details immediately around them.

A central goal of the Civic Knowledge Project is to reintroduce to the intellectual community at the University of Chicago the civic element of the "knowledge" endeavor. Each of us learns to be knowers not only by spending time with books or in laboratories, but also by being attentive to the concrete world around us and becoming capable of taking and processing the information it provides. The real world is as rich as any book, and a great proportion of our libraries' best books have been written by people who excelled at acquiring civic knowledge.

(2) A second idea also motivates the Civic Knowledge Project; namely, that different communities have analogous banks of knowledge within them. In every community, people's minds are full of memories and other types of useful knowledge. The only question is what types of knowledge different communities have. Successful democracies gather their strength and vitality from their ability to generate remarkably

rapid knowledge transmission and an impressively fluid circulation of knowledge across geographical and social barriers. In a successful democracy, social diversity should translate into an expanded knowledge base compiled from the banks of the entire citizenry.

In the US, however, the democracy's ability to stir up knowledge circulation fails at points of racial and ethnic difference in society. The relationship of the University of Chicago to the knowledge communities surrounding it serves as a case in point. The University community collectively possesses vast stores of historical, scientific and literary knowledge that flow only in thin streams to the surrounding communities; it also has much knowledge about the worlds of professions and about how to navigate in a professional world. This knowledge, too, circulates only minimally out of the University community to the Southside.

Analogously, communities around the University also have vast stores of knowledge: about the history of Chicago and the US; about religious theory and practice; and about a broad array of cultural artifacts. Just as the University community knows some things about music, poetry and theology, so does the community around the University, even if the specific contents of their respective treasure troves of knowledge differ. Also, communities around the University have much knowledge about how to survive in difficult economic conditions and too often dangerous urban settings; about the benefits of living on the Southside of Chicago; about how to live as a multilingual citizen (i.e. how to "code switch" between local dialects and standard English, as professional situations require). These specific knowledge troves would enhance the lives of members of the University community, if they could be transmitted to them. In short, the University and the knowledge communities around the University all have knowledge that would be useful to one another.

A central goal of the Civic Knowledge Project is to lead the University in generating modes of knowledge transmission between itself and its surrounding knowledge communities that might help jumpstart, in places where it has broken down or has never

existed, the process of cultural circulation and mutual influence that is crucial to socioeconomic mobility and fluidity, and successful democratic practice.