

Innovation Stories

Cultural Organizations Doing Things Differently



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The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts Northwestern University Settlement Association / Adventure Stage Chicago



The Innovators

Northwestern University Settlement Association (NUSA) was founded in 1891 as part of an international movement to bring a neighborhood voice to the issues being faced by families in low-income communities. Performing arts have been an important element of Settlement work since the movement began. NUSA is one of the few traditional University Settlement Houses left in the country and the oldest Settlement in the City of Chicago to remain in continuous operation. NUSA serves over 8,500 families (known as “neighbors”) in Chicago’s greater West Town / Humboldt Park neighborhood through a variety of educational, arts and social services programming. Staff and Board members are also considered neighbors in the process. Adventure Stage Chicago (ASC) has been part of NUSA since its founding in 2004. Chicago’s leading destination theater for young audiences ages eight to 14, ASC reaches 13,000 Chicago children each year.

The Innovation

NUSA integrated its social services, education and artistic practices into *The Crossroads Project*, creating alignment around a shared vision, produce deeper relationships with neighbors, and strengthen the interface among programs.

Starting Conditions

Although ASC had been enormously successful in attracting audiences from across Chicago, the Theater was having limited impact among NUSA's neighbors. Concerned that the Theater was neglecting its core mission, ASC Producing Artistic Director Tom Arvetis and NUSA President Ron Manderschied believed it was time to re-evaluate the Theater's relationship with the West Town community—and within the Settlement itself. As they struggled to understand the community's lack of participation, one thing became clear: The stories of West Town's immigrant populations were not being told on ASC's stage, and cultural and language barriers discouraged meaningful engagement.

At the same time, ASC was isolated within NUSA's structure and culture, operating more as an independent company than as an integral part of the institution. With help from the Innovation Lab, NUSA set out to bridge the gap between its social service programs and its artistic activities, and to make ASC relevant to the people the settlement's mission obligated the Theater to serve. "The vision," says Manderschied, "was to create a program that would be totally immersed and integrated throughout the organization and bring our original goals to life again."

The Lab

Transformative Moments

As the organization prepared to join the Innovation Lab, Manderschied admits that the Innovation Team struggled with how to achieve this ambitious vision. "When ASC was started, it did meet the mission of the Settlement in terms of the education component, outreach, partnering with the schools, etc.," Manderschied says, "but what it didn't do was really enrich the entire organization. It just didn't happen." Neither he nor Arvetis knew where to go with this observation, and they credit the Lab with giving them a focal point around which to assemble institutional leaders. "They came to the table by command performance," says Manderschied, "and then something magical happened."

After initial Phase 1 meetings, arriving at the five-day Lab Intensive in Virginia, NUSA Head Start Site Coordinator Linda McLaren was optimistic. "I really didn't know what this was going to be, but I was excited because I believed my families could feel this was their theater," she says. Her enthusiasm, however, was short-lived. "I'm the type of person who says, 'Let's get to what we need to do and go ahead and do it,' but when we got to Wednesday, I felt very frustrated." McLaren says she left the room, determined not to return. She credits Manderschied and ASC Company Member Dani Bryant with convincing her to try again. "The

breakthrough," says McLaren, was going back to the room. "I didn't think I could do it because it was too emotional, but in the nighttime, it came to me...I had to go back."

Arvetis agrees that Wednesday, the mid-point of the intensive, was a watershed day. "We were doing really well until Wednesday," he says, "and then the tires really got stuck in the mud. We left the room scratching our heads thinking we were going in one direction, and we looked down at the map and saw we were totally somewhere else. It was the will of the group to come back and not give up—to come up with something greater than we had imagined. The goal wasn't just to create a performance with community members, but to actually integrate artistic practice into the fabric and delivery of social services. Suddenly, the scale we were talking about was much greater. We were seeing the organization as a whole feeding itself, and instead of pulling at each other, we were seeing each other for the first time."

For Manderschied, the pivotal moment came when he realized he had been thinking only about what ACS could do for the other Settlement programs. "I remember sitting under that blossoming tree at Airlie and realizing that somehow we also have to feed the artistic soul. It's got to be a full circle, reciprocal in the fullest sense, and it's got to lead to creativity. We had to figure out how to give everybody

what they need but enrich the whole organization in the process." Arvetis had a similar breakthrough. "I naively thought it was about bringing the social services staff into the theater process," he says. "How could they as gatekeepers be matchmakers for us to make ASC less threatening? I failed to recognize that Linda has families to look after, and she wants to be more than a gatekeeper."

New Pathways to Mission

Still, it was difficult to overcome the isolation that existed at NUSA. While it was easy enough for the Theater to design artistic activities for neighbors, it was more difficult to build the strong internal partnerships that would make these efforts meaningful. The entire Team was committed to breaking past patterns, and the work NUSA and ASC did on realigning goals and practice is changing behaviors throughout the organization. Instead of working independently, program and service providers began collaborating to design mutually reinforcing activities that would meet the needs of neighbors. This cultural shift would create new common ground—and a new pathway to achieving NUSA's mission.

The Prototypes

Working in teams to design and implement three prototypes conceived during the Lab Intensive, NUSA's social service and artistic staff practiced their new

collaborative approach. Through *Summer Adventure*, they developed a theater curriculum for NUSA's annual eight-week Summer Adventure Camp. A *Head Start* prototype incorporated theater-based workshops for parents into its regular workshop series. In *Neighborhood Perspectives*, story circles with neighbors and staff resulted in an original theater production for the community.

In *Summer Adventure*, two classes of 12 campers each participated in bi-weekly theater classes. The curriculum paralleled the camp's weekly thematic activities, and a series of Weekly Adventures encouraged students to complete additional assignments at home with their parents. During Pirate Week, for example, students learned stage combat and recruited their families to participate in a pirate-themed Weekly Adventure. At the end of the camp, students created and performed an original theater piece.

Students were enthusiastic about the curriculum, saying they felt more comfortable talking in front of people, better understood what it meant to be in an ensemble, and were more capable of working with other campers. Arvetis reports that the teaching assistant has begun to incorporate some of the rituals established in the theater classes into the regular curriculum. "It's really incredible to see," he says. "She realizes that by engaging students in activities that require focus and that engender community in the group, she no longer has to govern them so closely, and her job is easier. This was a goal, but we didn't know it would happen so quickly."

NUSA's second prototype was a series of three workshops for *Head Start* parents based on ASC's concept of family literacy, a reciprocal learning approach Arvetis calls "the literacy of interpersonal relationships." The first workshop focused on community building within the parent group; the

second demonstrated how guided storytelling could engage families; and the third encouraged parents to explore their own ideas about play and to create their own games. The goal was to help parents use the idea of play more effectively with their children. While staff were not entirely satisfied with these initial efforts to integrate the artistic process into *Head Start*'s framework, they are confident they will continue to identify new ideas and opportunities for joint activities thanks to the relationships developed between neighbors, and *Head Start* and ASC staff.

Neighborhood Perspectives was created to help ASC build stronger relationships with neighbors already participating in social service program areas and to give a voice to the community through storytelling and a shared community event. The prototype involved a series of eight story circles for NUSA neighbors and staff. Using original material from the story circles, ASC writers and directors developed three short plays that were performed publicly for neighbors by ASC ensemble members, NUSA staff, neighbors, and Spanish-speaking professional actors.

The only prototype that did not build on an existing program, *Neighborhood Perspectives* was transformational for participants. McLaren says, "A lot of things came out in the story circles that I didn't know even after working with families for ten years." She also began to see the Theater's staff differently, adding, "I saw their body language, the sincerity and empathy when they listened to the stories my people were telling." Arvetis is enthusiastic about the results as well. "We started the process not knowing where we would end up, and while what emerged was not something ASC would normally produce, we now have lots of ideas about how to move it closer to the Theater's aesthetic—toward a fuller spectrum of ages and cultures."



Obstacles and Enablers

A strong focus on core values and shared vision—articulated first by Mandersheid and reinforced during the Lab Intensive—has become the primary enabler of NUSA's growing success. NUSA also benefits from a historically clear mission that provides a firm touchstone as staff members continue to build internal bridges.

The commitment of Manderschied and Arvetis to the project was central to its success, but they admit it's never easy to guide such large-scale cultural change. Manderschied says, "The biggest challenge for us is time. We need to devote more time to the collaborative work, and we need to make it someone's responsibility to keep the fire going or we risk it falling apart again." At the same time, he admits that finding time is difficult. "We're talking about transforming what's here but also still doing what's here," he says, "and we can't just shut down 25 percent of what happens." Taking a lesson from the Lab, Manderschied says he plans to take an expanded leadership team offsite to consider what's next.

Manderschied also emphasizes the importance of engaging the right people at the outset. "You need people who are open-minded and loyal to the organization, but committed to making it better," he says, "as well as a leader who is able to step back and allow people their creativity." McLaren adds how critical it was to have Board members and outsiders at the table during the Intensive. "They so helped the process," she says, "by giving us an unbiased third eye that

Obstacles and Enablers (cont'.)

was focused on the good of the whole institution.”

Getting people inside the organization to embrace the work was an immediate obstacle for the Team when it returned from the Intensive. Arvetis notes, “I had to spend some time enrolling artists who weren’t necessarily skeptical, but who didn’t know how they fit into this process.” There was resistance on the social service side of the organization as well. EmcArts facilitator Melissa Dibble observes that some staff needed time “to own the deep assumption-shifting change that was the premise of NUSA’s Lab idea.” She adds, “They fear the new activities will just be icing on the cake of their long-standing practices....and they don’t

understand how the work will affect their interactions with neighbors.”

The exceptional design of the prototypes went a long way in overcoming these obstacles. By building on existing programs, the prototypes focused on creating leverage from within, and because they were designed as mutually reinforcing activities, they succeeded in building momentum among neighbors. Many of the people who participated in *Neighborhood Perspectives*, for example, also attended workshops through the *Head Start* prototype. According to McLaren, Head Start parents were more open to the workshop experience because they had gained confidence in the story circles, and they were comfortable with the artists because they had already met them through another prototype. As a result, McLaren says

she sees the parents on a whole new level, “so faithful and open and feeling good....They felt esteemed. I still see it to this day.”

Staff anticipated that language might be a problem since none of the ACS staff speaks Spanish, but bilingual social services staff stepped in to help. The anticipated language barrier actually turned out to be a source of humor for theater staff and neighbors as neighbors began teaching ensemble members key words in Spanish. Families—who came to the final *Neighborhood Perspectives* production expecting to hear only English—were thrilled to hear Spanish. McLaren says that observing the families throughout the prototype process was “an emotional roller coaster I didn’t expect.”

The Impact

NUSA’s work already has had tremendous impact on neighbors. One Neighborhood Perspectives participant says, “It’s like when you have a good dream and wake up and you say, ‘It was a dream, it never happened.’ But this was a dream I never thought to have and it really happened.” NUSA’s Lab experience also has created a stronger staff, as well as a stronger sense of mutual commitment and shared vision. Arvetis says the impact is huge. “Rarely, if ever, did we find time to talk about why we do what we do,” he says. “Now, because we’ve talked about why, we see each other a little bit differently. Before, we were all working in silos. We knew what we did was important, but we lacked the ability to reach out and connect with each other.”

The greatest change in the organization, Team members say, is that they believe they can work together effectively to improve the integration of the Theater into the neighborhood-focused programming of the Settlement. Social service, Education and ASC staff know each other better and are learning to contribute their individual talents to advancing the organization’s mission. Families know the Theater better, and their newfound familiarity is contributing to stronger relationships between ASC and its neighbors. Theater staff members are learning Spanish in order to communicate more effectively.

The next challenge, says Manderschied, is figuring out how to institutionalize the work and make it part of the organization’s culture. If staff responses are any indication, NUSA is well on its way. McLaren says, “I know my families better. Why would I give that up?” Arvetis says his participation in the Lab “totally rejuvenated” his purpose at the Settlement. “It’s a luxury to be an artist who only has to worry about the art,’ but in my mind my function as an artist has completely changed. Now I come to work thinking about the community, about how my decisions as an artist affect that community. What’s the dialogue I am in with that community, and how can I really embrace my role in that community as an artist? There are so many more opportunities to explore as a result of asking these questions.”

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