



Proximity Epistemology in Jane Addams (1860–1935)

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Jane Addams believed in the value of proximal knowledge: the unique understanding and sympathies that develop from living physically close to others and having meaningful direct interactions with one another. Engaging, listening, and observing with respect to gain both explicit and tacit understanding are characteristics of proximity epistemology. Addams, along with Ellen Gates Starr co-founded Hull House in Chicago, one of the earliest and most recognized establishments in the United States Settlement Movement during the Progressive Era of the late 19th and early 20th century. Hull House started modestly as the rental of a single floor of a building and grew to several blocks of a community organizing and service dynamo originating a plethora of programs including adult education, sports, union organizing, cultural events, and health and safety programs. All of which emerged from proximal knowledge.

For Addams, Hull House was essentially a community dedicated to being good neighbors. She describes the activities of the settlement as derived from, “no preconceived notion of what a Social Settlement should be, but have increased gradually on demand and “consult their neighbors on the advisability of each new undertaking.” Accordingly, proximal knowledge informs and attenuates effective responsiveness. Addams explicitly refuses to think of Hull House as charity work but instead places the work of the settlement community in the realm of good citizenship in action. The basis of this action was learning the needs of the immigrant neighbors.

In one landmark activity, the Hull House community sought to collect and formalize their local knowledge through an urban demographic analysis published in 1895 as *Hull House Maps and Papers*. This study is considered a pioneering and innovative urban study including color coded maps to demark the various ethnicities in the neighborhood. The project was entirely organized and financed by women.

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Keywords:

Chicago, Hull House, proximal knowledge, urban study, responsiveness, Ellen Gates Starr