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Chad Hoggan, Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert, Renee Owen

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Refereed Articles

Living Democracy: Social Structures that Promote Civic Learning

Chad Hoggan¹ , Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert², and Renee Owen³ 

Abstract: Democracy is not only a system of government, but also an overarching way of living together. It is through the social structures we live in and the resulting social relations, behaviors, and norms emanating from those structures, that we learn how to live together, democratically or otherwise.

Adult education can promote the learning of democracy by helping people develop social structures that are democratic in form and function. Drawing on examples from Europe and the U.S., this article presents two such structures: (1) the system of voluntary associations in Germany; and (2) sociocracy as a form of democratic institutional governance. This article discusses how these structures can promote processes through which participants practice living democratically. Six principles for adult civic learning are thus derived: Inclusivity, Horizontal Relationships, Polycentricity,

Confluence of Expert and Amateur, Interdependence between Specific Situations and Larger Contexts, and the Reciprocal Nature of Civic Learning and Solidarity.

Keywords: civic education, sociocracy, volunteerism, democracy, dewey

“THE SEVEN KEY PRINCIPLES OF SOCIOCRACY HELP TO PUT DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE, ALLOWING FOR THE LEARNING OF DEMOCRACY THROUGH THE LIVING OF DEMOCRACY.”

With Dewey (1916), we envision democracy not only as a system of government, but more so as an overarching way of living together—where citizens participate individually and collectively in civic actions, making political decisions that affect their lives and in doing so perceive themselves as co-creators rather than spectators of their worlds.

What are these “civic actions,” though, and how do we help people develop the abilities to engage in them? We do not restrict this to mean voting, or even to engagement in local politics or demonstrating for (or against) a cause. One way of understanding the scope of civic

DOI: 10.1177/10451595221149765. From ¹North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA, ²University of Augsburg, Germany, and ³Southern Oregon University, Ashland, OR, USA. Address correspondence to: Chad Hoggan, North Carolina State University, Campus Box 7801, Poe Hall 310Q, Raleigh, NC 27695, USA. Email: cdhoggan@ncsu.edu.

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actions can be gleaned from Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) typology of civic education, which they derived from an examination of 10 school-based civic education programs in Canada. They describe these curricula as implicitly advancing three fundamentally different types of civic capacities. At the most basic level is the preparation of the "Personally Responsible Citizen," one who obeys laws, pays taxes, recycles, gives blood, and otherwise acts responsibly in contributing to the variety of needs in their shared world. These represent only one, albeit important, type of civic actions. Second in Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) typology is the "Participatory Citizen." These people are active members of community groups and local improvement efforts. Going beyond mere participation, these people organize efforts to "care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up the environment" (p.242). To be effective, they must know how government agencies work and how to accomplish collective tasks. And third on Westheimer and Kahne's typology are "Justice-oriented Citizens" who look deeper at social problems, searching out injustices and their root causes. These people need firm understandings of social movements and how to effect systemic change (p.242).

The civic actions demonstrated through this typology are all important. There is a need for citizens to function within the current system, to take leadership roles, and to ask deeper questions about how we need to do better.

Looking more specifically at the civic actions that are a necessary part of a well-functioning democracy, helps us to then analyze the learning required to be able to engage in them. We are skeptical that such learning can be adequately obtained through a couple of courses in high school or college. There is a need for lifelong civic education. And, civic education for adults is especially tricky because there is not, and probably *should not* be, compulsory education for adults. Therefore, a civic education for adults needs to consider the constraints it must work within. Although formal and nonformal civic

education can be highly impactful, the most common civic learning occurs through daily social living.

We begin our considerations for how an adult civic education might be enacted with the premise that it is the social structures we live and engage in and the social relations, behaviors, and norms emanating from those structures that implicitly teach us how to live together, democratically or otherwise. Whether it is under a representative government controlled by moneyed interests, a hierarchical corporation, or a participatory, deliberatively-designed organization, the social context promotes certain capacities and attitudes. We do not argue here for a deterministic approach, where a person is perceived as the prisoner of the structure; the opportunity to be active co-shapers always exists through our participation in (or non-participation in or resistance to) the social structures we live in, to greater or lesser degrees. Nevertheless, the context influences the corresponding social relations, behaviors, and norms. We live our lives enmeshed in all these structures and more, learning in and from them, being shaped by them.

If the practice of adult education is to have much influence in helping people learn democracy, it must help people learn how to develop social structures that are democratic in form and function. We present here two structures worth considering: (1) the system of voluntary associations in Germany, and (2) *sociocracy* as a form of democratic institutional governance. We discuss how these structures promote processes through which participants practice living democratically and thereby develop civic capacities. Finally, this article proposes six principles of adult civic learning.

Voluntary Associations and Adult Civic Learning: An Example from Germany

Our discussion here will focus on the special personal experience of active participation in organizing and leading an association in

Augsburg, Germany, that started with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This section explores voluntary associations as spaces of adult learning and the dimensions and possible outcomes of this learning.

Whether in a volunteer fire brigade, an athletic club, or a neighborhood improvement group, almost half of all adults in Germany are members of a club or association (Krimmer, 2018, p.5). The right to set up an association is even anchored in the Constitution. Associations have been considered as places where adults learn—in the reading societies of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, in the rural, artisan associations, in the workers' associations, in sport clubs or hobby associations. Association culture has not yet been in the center of attention of adult learning (or civic adult learning); it was at best mentioned under the umbrella of conviviality (Seitter, 2018) or as a means of empowerment for marginalized groups (Sperk & Ortner, 2021). Olbrich (2001), however, sees the history of adult education in Europe rooted in the self-organizing initiatives of the 18th century, such as reading associations and literature and music circles, which represented the different forms of socializing that overgrew the limitations and restrictions of social classes. The impact of those formations went beyond mere sociability: they contributed to the development and acquisition of new knowledge and to the establishment of new social and communicative behavior independent of class and socio-economic status (Seitter, 2018, p. 66).

Learning for democracy in associations was (and is) a type of informal learning, embedded in everyday-life activities of people dealing jointly with challenges. In this context, there is a dissolution of institutionalized control of learning. Thus, even if adults are not involved in any compulsory educational system, they are self-organized in communities, groups, and clubs that serve as spaces of encounter, and also as spaces where learning occurs—learning through participation in and managing of the group's life and structures, but also social learning, community organizing, learning through civic

and social action. As West (2016) describes, in today's world there is often:

... the stultified experience of citizenship in many schools and communities, of an absence of space where democracy might be learned and practised. We might broaden this further to encompass the making of democratic subjectivities in intimate as well as public space. ... This is Anthony Giddens's (1999) territory of the "democracy of the emotions"—in which citizens experience relationships of respect—and more open forms of dialogue in families, schools, and public space, as an alternative to the "sedimented power of tradition." (p. 12)

When Russia launched its war against Ukraine in the early morning hours of February 24, 2022, (co-author) Tetyana (Tanja) Hoggan-Kloubert's phone was in constant use. She was calling her family and friends in Ukraine, but also people living in her current residence of Augsburg, Germany, with the "typical" civic question: "What should we do?" (Levine, 2022). By 8:00 a.m., in her living room were several people, either writing at the table, painting slogans on placards laid out on the floor, answering questions for reporters, talking with city officials, organizing a "roadmap" of what to do in the next days, and preparing the registration paperwork for a civic demonstration that evening. There were people whom she did not know before, but with whom she felt connected by working shoulder to shoulder toward a shared goal. Only a few weeks later, these people, united by the idea of engaging in civic activities against the Russian war, in support of Ukrainian refugees, and for a democratic future, founded an association entitled Deutsch Ukrainischer Dialog (German Ukrainian Dialogue).

In this association, learning for democracy was embedded in an often polyfunctional associational structure with a wide variety of activities and services provided by its members, such as:

- providing legal advice, migrant counseling, and assistance in navigating the complicated system of German bureaucracy;
- organizing demonstrations and other recurring events in prominent spaces of the city to raise consciousness of the war in all its dimensions;
- providing social services, including food and clothes to refugees in need, as well as coordinating with the city, county (Bezirk), and state (Bundesland) officials to respond to housing and other needs of refugees;
- conducting cultural, leisure, and educational activities, such as culinary evenings, etc., to build public relationships between local Germans and the influx of new Ukrainian refugees

Learning for democracy is an implicit part of all these activities. One of the characteristics of these initiatives—with long-term consequences for learning for democracy—is its self-organizing “from below”; we as citizens were able within a short time to create an association with its own mission, laid down in a mandatory, strictly regulated statute, to get financial and judicial approvals, and to obtain external fundings and donations in order to be able to realize our goals. Through the work of the association, important competencies and attitudes were developed, such as how to communicate with state authorities, to organize demonstrations, to obtain financial support, to mobilize large groups of people, but also the experience of being capable of political action, of “civic friendship” through standing with each other for months, of realizing that the world around us can be changed and improved through collective action. We witnessed the new association become a respected partner with other NGOs and local government administrations. In its nature, this was a form of experiential learning. While sometimes using well-established practices and expertise, association members also needed to handle challenges and tasks by spontaneously creating new ad-hoc strategies in an amateurish way. As an example: we needed to re-write the

official statute of the association after having obtained all the necessary bureaucratic approvals because we did not consider some taxation regulations (because none of the members were familiar with tax laws). We learned from our mistakes, but we still continue to make mistakes. We also developed and improved imaginative capacities while trying to translate our conceptual and innovative thinking into practical action.

We were learning to cooperate with the system (bureaucracy, city administration, state authorities), but also to see the system’s shortcomings and fill the gaps where needed. Learning for democracy, as we have observed through this experience, is both system-maintaining and system-transforming. We see this coinciding with Westheimer and Kahne’s typology of civic education. Through cooperating with the local administrative systems, we learned how to successfully connect the efforts between the city administration and local civic initiatives in order to provide support to the 5000 refugees who arrived within 5 months in Augsburg, thus promoting “participatory citizens” willing and capable of “participat(ing) in the civic affairs and the social life of the community” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p.243).” At the same time, we learned to recognize and articulate the lacunae and deficiencies of the system (e.g., an overly-complicated bureaucratic system, according to which the registration of refugees needed to be approved by three different authorities) and to fight for the needed changes, thus promoting “justice-oriented citizens” willing and capable of assessing social, political, and economic structures and working to transform them. Learning for democracy is situated within a dialectical conceptual framework; the current system and its transformation are not opposites, neither are institutional structures and (human) agency mutually exclusive.

The learning outcomes described here can be viewed from two perspectives, that of the individual and that of the community. From the individual perspective, a member of the association might have learned to take responsibility, understand more deeply the

different systems in place at various levels of local government, and/or improved leadership and communicative capacities. From the community perspective, association life holds the potential to diminish social fragmentation and to increase feelings of solidarity, security, and social cohesion, while also developing the capacity for collective action for social and political change.

But the learning which is possible in voluntary associations is not limited to seeking for cohesion and finding a consensus, but also aims at acknowledging the plurality of views, goals, and aspirations and fostering a tolerance for ambiguity. This is a challenge that we faced almost immediately after beginning our shared civic action: within the association there were (and still are) different visions for the direction the association should take and of current politics, and sometimes we are afraid of being torn apart. Wildermeersch and Vandenabeele elaborate on the possible pitfalls of focusing only on social cohesion: The “communities or associations [...] are composed of ‘members’ who gather on the basis of sameness”; “commonalities, rather than the difference are the backbone of the community” (2007, p. 27). However, difference and plurality is the constitutive element of democracy as such. The emphasis on overcoming differences in order to foster social cohesion and togetherness may create “exclusive and exclusionary spaces where the learning of citizenship ends up with the strengthening of the subjectivities of those who are inside and negating the subjectivities of those who are outside” (p. 28). There is, thus, a tension that exists between this solidarity and social cohesion within the group and the larger civic need for inclusivity and plurality. The simple act of participating in an association does not automatically lead to the development of the latter. No association can include a comprehensive range of diversity among participants, and the valuing and respecting of diversity can easily be limited only to those groups and views represented. An association whose focus requires ideological conformity is likely going to contribute to the formation of an

echo chamber rather than a respecting and valuing of plurality. It may promote solidarity among its members, but likely not among society as a whole.

This phenomenon is usefully explored through Putnam’s distinction between bridging and bonding social capital. Despite Putnam’s somewhat uncritical approach to social capital, this contrast is essential in distinguishing between exclusivity and openness. For Putnam, “bonding” social capital consists of “inward looking [networks that] tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups,” while he defines “bridging” social capital as open networks that are “outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages” (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). This distinction is helpful in capturing the dynamics of an associational democratic learning. While it is important to create a unity of members based on shared identity and aspirations, care should be taken not to form an exclusive group. Association life thus has the potential to involve civic action that contributes to a societal trust, be it a generalized trust (in people in general) or the particularized (in specific people or groups) (Uslaner, 2002). (Co-author’s trust in particular persons from the community caused her to call together people in her living room when the Russian war against Ukraine started, which led to founding an association. Through the work within the association and the experience of collaboration with different actors and institutions of the city, we as members developed a generalized trust in the citizens as an “imagined” community that is able to solve problems and find a way to live peacefully with each other). Trust, as well as social capital, is an important driver of civic learning, but also the consequence that contributes to further learning and involvement.

Civic action and the resulting civic learning never happen in isolation; we need others to act. Communication is a key element of this process, which itself must be democratically organized if it is going to contribute to the development of civic capacities, because it

establishes patterns of co-creative action and of relationships as partners. Communication is a process “in which meanings are shared, recreated, and reconstructed, and through which individuals grow, change and transform” (Biesta, 2007, p. 10). This type of communication does not emerge from the mere existence of different points of view, but requires such practices as: striving for mutual understanding, perspective taking, intentional sharing and reflecting on essential differences, and striving towards informed, well-argued deliberation and decision-making. Ideally, such communicative practice enhances both: bonding between members of a community and developing further-reaching civic capacities needed for engagement with the broader society.

Here again, the design of the association’s practices can be shaped to promote or to hinder civic learning. For instance, hierarchical decision-making practices can inhibit learning for democracy. Acting unilaterally is inevitable in some cases, whether because a decision needs to be made quickly or the number of decisions is so extensive as to preclude full deliberation, but when acting unilaterally rather than deliberately, we deprive the involved persons of the opportunity to find their voice, to articulate it, and, eventually, to act civically. We deprive them of democratic practices and the experience of co-creation. In our work within the association, we experience the benefits of participation and co-creation, as well as the moments of frustration and overload, because:

Participation sometimes produces strong commitment of the actors involved, but also at other occasions, lots of refusal, resistance, and sometimes resignation when eventually, the procedures of collaboration turn out to be complex, bureaucratic, and expert-driven. (Wildemeersch & Vandenabeele, 2007, p. 25)

As mentioned above, any democratic system that strives for freedom in a pluralistic world

must presuppose, and even strive for, a plurality of views among its members. Difference is a constitutive part of a democracy as such. In our voluntary association, we did notice the challenge of creating an open and critique-friendly environment on the one side, and diminishing the danger of cohesion of the group through the critical remarks of the members on the other side. Learning to respect and value plurality is, however (even when difficult to achieve), an essential civic capacity, and mutual engagement in a shared, voluntary work allows plurality to be experienced in a spirit of solidarity.

Democratic/civic actions become part of a wider democratic fabric that is experienced in daily life rather than just through periodic voting actions. In Arendt’s (1963/2016) terms, *action* (as opposed to *work* or *labor*) is the highest form of human activity and allows a person to evolve to her fullest self. Action happens where people meet each other, united in solidarity and humanity, speaking in different voices in the spirit of plurality; it is a fundamental quality of human existence. When people come together and act, something new and wonderful can emerge. Hannah Arendt describes this as *natality*. Together we are able to take initiative and find unprecedented solutions. The capacity to be open to, explore, and create new possibilities, is an important learning outcome of a civic action.

The structure of the association, its practices and interactions, can be more or less democratic, and therefore more or less efficacious in developing civic capacities. Recognition of this fact is key. The learning that occurs through activity in voluntary associations develops civic capacities in several ways. At its best, it is an interactive and democratic communication, growing together, negotiating meaning, and developing new patterns of action, all of which promote plural learning outcomes that are neither predetermined nor externally prescribed. Because the structure, design, practices, and interactions shape the learning experiences of participants (for better and for worse), they can

all be assessed in terms of the extent to which decision-making, communication, disagreement, and so forth are democratic and accepting of plurality, as opposed to hierarchical and marginalizing, as well as the extent to which they result in increased solidarity, trust, and social cohesion (within the group and within the larger society).

Sociocracy as a Way of Living Democracy

Our second example comes out of the field of organizational development. In the last decade, the number of organizations adopting radically decentralized forms of organizational governance has burgeoned (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Saxena & Jagota, 2016; Schell & Bischof, 2022; Velinov et al., 2018). Post-bureaucratic, self-organizing, and self-managing are some of the terms used to describe institutions seeking more innovative, agile, humane, and equitable forms of organizational governance (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). For our purposes here, the terms self-managing organization (SMO) and self-organizing will be used, except when referring to a specific form of self-organizing governance, called sociocracy.

Part of the impetus for adopting SMO-style governance for firms is to overcome the malaise of employee disengagement that hierarchical “carrot and stick” management produces (Lai, 2017; Mierson, 2015). Employee disengagement in the business world, which can result from powerlessness and disenfranchised decision-making, may be akin to citizen disengagement in the civic realm. It seems reasonable that if citizens were highly engaged in decision-making via self-organized power structures in their day-to-day micro-worlds (such as their educational institutions and workplaces), the habits of mind and behaviors of civic engagement might carry over into the macroworld of the civic realm. In other words, if citizens were *living* democracy in their day-to-day lives, it seems logical that they would be better prepared to do the same in their civic lives, as long as the governance structures of

the civic arena allowed for responsive civic engagement.

To explore this possibility, we share below some of the key principles of a self-organizing form of governance called sociocracy and identify how sociocratic principles can contribute to *living* democracy at the organizational level. Then, we take a brief look into a case of implementing the principles of self-organizing in a public municipality.

The Key Principles of Sociocracy

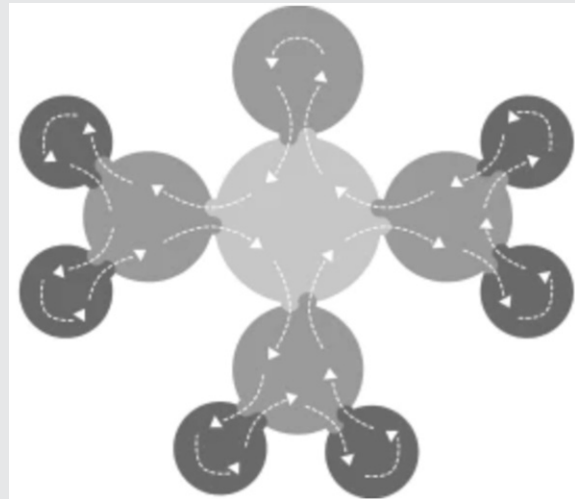
The philosophy of a sociocratic organization is based on concepts from cybernetics and biomimicry (Buck & Villines, 2017; Owen & Buck, 2020), where the organization mimics nature to maintain a dynamic equilibrium. A metaphor for the sociocratic organization is a living organism, which is adaptable, complex, and interconnected with other living organisms (Laloux, 2014). As such, some of its key features are:

1. Inherently relational, or relationship-based (rather than mechanistic or material). The etymology of sociocracy is *socio* (companion) and *cracy* (to govern), meaning governance through relationships (Buck and Villines, 2017). Decisions are made co-creatively through relating to one another, which humanizes the governance process and makes it accessible. Furthermore, there is an underlying ontology in Theory Y, the belief that people are intrinsically motivated when they have meaningful connections to one another and their fate is clearly wrapped up together (Gino & Staats, 2014).
2. Circular design. People are organized into literal and metaphoric “circles,” and decisions are made in a circular method of “lead-do-measure.” Similar to plan-act-measure, these cycles of lead-do-measure generate feedback loops that enhance organizational learning (Buck & Villines,

2017) through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and continual improvement.

3. Double linking connects circles in a webbed fashion. Circles that are at higher levels of abstraction have a leader linking down to the next circle level, and representatives from lower circles link upwards. Double linking ensures power and information flow throughout the organization (again, in feedback loops), rather than in a linear, uni-directional, hierarchical manner [Figure 1](#).
4. Autonomy within unity around common aims. Each circle has a clear aim, or purpose, as does each individual role. Circles and individuals have autonomy to make operational decisions and to use resources in service to their prescribed aim and domain (Rau & Gonzalez, 2018). People report being happier, and therefore more engaged, when they have control and a sense of self-efficacy to create or co-create decisions that affect them (Bandura, 1997; Gino & Staats, 2014).
5. Decisions made by informed consent. In a consent process, a decision is made once there are no “paramount” objections, or no stated reasons why a proposal would be at cross purposes with the circle’s (or organization’s) aim. To make decisions by consent requires hearing all facets/ perspectives during the decision-making process. Any individual can object to a decision with informed reason, which requires a process that catalyzes innovation, as participants have to co-create decisions that benefit all, or at least do no harm. Informed consent eliminates the tyranny of the majority, as all minority opinions are authentically considered. Not only is informed consent decision-making more equitable and fairer, but empowering minority voices with decision-making agency means that even those in the extreme minority have

Figure 1. Circular feedback loops and double linking ensure power and information flows throughout an organization. Figure credit: <https://www.sociocracyforall.org/sociocracy/>



motivation to show up and participate. In the end, all are authentically accountable for all decisions (Owen & Buck, 2020; Romme et al., 2016).

6. Structured dialogues. Facilitated dialogical processes, such as rounds that allow every voice to be heard one-by-one, emphasize expressive behavior (Romme et al., 2016) and reflective listening (Owen & Buck, 2020). Duhigg (2016) found that productive teams are a result of people speaking for approximately the same amount of time, something rounds help to accomplish. Rounds also increase a sense of psychological safety, one of the most important components of effective organizational productivity (Edmondson, 1999; Duhigg, 2016; Garvin et al., 2008).
7. Participatory epistemology. The process and spirit of sociocracy is one of naturally embedded, ongoing participatory action research (Bradbury-Huang & Reason, 2007), resulting in continual learning and development for individuals and for the organization as a whole.

(Co-author) Renee Owen personal experience with self-organizing governance comes from the field of education. As Head of School at Rainbow Community School (RCS), an independent school in the United States, she was satisfied with how well RCS functioned on the surface, but concerned that what she called a “benign monarchy” was undermining opportunity for distributed leadership and wider and deeper participatory decision-making.

The transition to sociocracy at RCS was exciting, but not simple or easy. The organization experienced a rapid acceleration of innovation. New ideas on how to solve chronic problems created break-through solutions that led to dynamic success, including rapid enrollment increases and campus expansion (Owen & Buck, 2020). At the same time, multiple new conflicts arose that needed to be navigated. Toxicity in the organization rose to the surface because the sociocratic process reveals hidden agendas and undercurrent discontent. While this is ultimately healthy, it was a painful process. People were uncomfortable with the open negotiation of conflict and disagreement. Eventually, as people adapted to the paradigm shift, they embraced shared empowerment. Today, Rainbow is considered a model for justice and diversity, and Renee believes that participatory power-sharing, inherent in sociocracy, is essential for an equitable school.

Since then, Renee has consulted with schools in the U.S. that are adopting sociocracy. In addition to schools, the number of NGO’s and for-profit firms that are experimenting with principles of self-organizing governance are rapidly expanding in many parts of the world, particularly Scandinavian countries and the U.S.

Cases of implementing self-organizing principles in government are rare. One such case is from Utrechtse Heuvelrug (UH), a municipality in the Netherlands of about 50,000 citizens (Romme, et al., 2016). UH adopted principles of “sociocratic circular organization” (p. 2) after a series of unpopular decisions diminished trust in public officials and broken-down democratic systems in the city. UH reported a large gap

between its citizens and public institution, or between those with power and the seemingly powerless, winners and losers—resulting in diminished effective civic engagement.

More than 30 public and private organizations have successfully implemented sociocracy in the Netherlands, so UH decided to employ similar principles in its civic structure in hopes of developing effective collaborative relationships between citizens and public officials, thereby increasing constructive civil participation.

The new UH civic model included the following features. Council and committee circles make decisions using consent across all represented parties (rather than the previous system of the party in control defining new policy). New structures, including regular Thursday evening meetings, for citizens to form and express opinions and ideas *early* in the policy development process. Any citizen can join policy project groups (circles) to investigate topics and suggest solutions. City council defines boundaries (such as budget constraints), and committees have the autonomy to craft policy within those boundaries. A sociocracy cycle of forming ideas, making decisions, and feedback became widespread practice.

Romme et al.’s case study (2016) documents the perceived preliminary outcomes of the UH experiment, which was 2 years underway at the time of his study. He discovered that UH citizens and officials found the new practices promising in revitalizing civic engagement and transforming from “competition and collusion to collaboration” as the title of Romme’s research suggests.

Key Insights from Romme et al.’s Sociocracy Case Study

1. The process of informed consent develops mutual respect.

The mayor of UH: “In our new approach, citizens can talk with councilors on equal terms. They no longer talk *to* each other, but now talk *with* each other.”

2. Transformation from power over to power with.

The city council took on an “orchestrator role of civic participation” (p. 7) using productive dialogue

3. Collective accountability may create more broadly accepted decisions.

“In this collective learning process they noticed the knowledge and opinions of each individual participant may contribute to making decisions that are socially and politically legitimate as well as (content-wise) of high quality.” (p. 7).

4. Capacity for collective learning increased.

Romme’s findings note that by eliminating the inefficiency of people working against one another with majority-minority power plays and coalition forming, UH was better able to harvest the expertise of its citizens and more efficiently meet their needs.

A story from Romme’s report demonstrates the real-life impact on citizens and civic wellbeing. In 2015 UH, all Dutch cities were being asked to provide sanctuary to large numbers of refugees. While the chaos of the refugee crises plunged many Dutch cities into civic turbulence, UH responded using their new sociocratic circular processes. Facilitated by the city council, citizens engaged in public dialogue. UH agreed to welcome refugees and, in the end, hosted a higher percentage of them than most other Dutch cities—with widespread support due to the broad participation in the decision, resulting in public accountability.

This anecdote points to the possibility that by engaging citizens in a circular structure, their civic thoughts and behaviors may change. Other Dutch cities were not as apt to extend open arms to refugees, but UH citizens embraced values of humanity and care. Could engagement within the nature-based circular structure of self-organizing, stimulate a transformation to a participatory epistemology in citizens? Perhaps due to its

biomimicry of webbed systems, civic engagement can promote an experience of interconnectedness. Maybe due to its structured dialogical process, humans are simply more likely to see the perspectives of others, opening hearts and minds to their common experience and shared unity.

Conclusionary Thoughts and Questions

We present in this article two important examples of ways to promote learning for democracy by living democratically. In the first, we point to the culture of associations that exists in Germany. There are, of course, many examples of volunteer organizations and social associations in other countries, but as [Putnam \(2000\)](#) pointed out over 20 years ago, and we observe still exists, in the U.S. there is a disturbing trend of non-participation, which has arguably led to some of the current problems of polarization. As adult education scholars, we can seek to understand how to encourage participation in volunteer associations, how to structure those forms of participation to promote the learning of civic capacities, and how to effectively learn from those participatory experiences. As adult education practitioners, we can use the creation and effective design of volunteer associations as a mechanism to promote mutuality, solidarity, dealing with plurality, creative problem-solving, and other important civic capacities. We argue here that a) people will learn to live with plurality if they are engaged in activities and projects of mutual concern with a diversity of other people; and b) the design and practices of that participation (in terms of inter alia decision-making, communication, disagreement, as well as in terms of its openness vs. exclusivity) will influence the extent to which those experiences will result in the learning and development of civic capacities.

In our second example, we point to sociocracy as a systematic approach to the design of social organizations, including volunteer associations, of course, but also extending to municipalities,

for-profit enterprises, schools, and other environments where people work together on a daily basis. The seven key principles of sociocracy help to put democratic principles into practice, allowing for the learning of democracy through the living of democracy. Although we are not saying that sociocracy, per se, is the only solution, we do argue that in a democracy, people's daily lives would ideally be lived in a more democratic arrangement than in strongly hierarchical systems that do not support the learning of democracy and in many ways contradict it. If democracy is to be more than just the system of government, if it is to be a way of living together, then we can and should work at transforming the structures of our social environments, whether work, educational, governmental, or avocational (as in associations).

From these examples and the insights gleaned from them, through the aforementioned case study and our own personal experiences, we can derive some tentative principles of learning for democracy in adulthood. They are certainly neither inevitable nor necessarily shared by all situations of social participation. Rather, they are promoted or diminished depending on the extent to which the structures, and their resulting social relations, behaviors, and norms, are more democratic or authoritarian. Although the following principles of adult civic learning are not exhaustive, they can lay a foundation for conceptualizing learning for democracy through living democratically. These principles are:

#1: Inclusivity

Adult civic learning is inclusive and not exclusive; it aims at involving the largest possible number of people who would live democracy and thereby co-shape the idea of democracy. To achieve this aim, a society needs a plural, multi-faced structure of learning possibilities that corresponds to the plural views and beliefs in the society.

#2: Horizontal Relationships

Adult civic learning is horizontal and non-hierarchical. Learning through democratic living in adulthood is more of a learning with each other and from each other, and not from the authority figure "who knows better." Adult civic learning is

thus built on the principle of autonomy and co-creation.

#3: Polycentricity

Adult civic learning is promoted through structures that consist of plural centers of decision-making and power, while at the same time preserving an overarching unity and shared vision.

#4: Confluence of Expert and Amateur

Alongside the necessary professional knowledge and time-tested practices, adult civic learning is to a certain extent an amateurish learning. We are brought into new situations and confronted with new challenges, and with others we develop new strategies, often through trial and error.

#5: Interdependence between Specific Situations and Larger Contexts

Adult civic learning is oriented towards the life-world in which the participants live. It addresses their concerns, resources, and contexts. It also cannot be detached from concrete political situations, but rather responds to them. Through this bridge between the personal life-world and the larger context, adult civic learning can serve as a path to social emancipation and political change.

#6: Reciprocal Nature of Civic Learning and Solidarity

Civic learning occurs where a certain level of "particularized societal trust" exists; in turn, it enhances and promotes general social solidarity, civic friendships, social cohesion, and a "generalized societal trust."

We began with the premise that it is the social structures we live in and the resulting social relations, behaviors, and norms emanating from those structures that we learn how to live together, democratically or otherwise. Our lives are enmeshed in these structures, learning in and from them, being shaped by them. From participatory, deliberative social structures, we learn to be active co-shapers of our shared world. If democracy is to be not merely a system of government, but rather a system of mutual living, then we need to invest our energy into shaping social structures such that they promote the living of democracy in all contexts of our lives.

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ORCID iDs

Chad Hoggan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7759-591X>

Renee Owen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9417-1537>

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Author Biographies

Chad Hoggan is an associate professor of Adult and Lifelong Education at North Carolina State University, co-editor of the Journal of

Transformative Education, and co-director of the Institute for Civic Studies and Learning for Democracy. His research addresses learning and change during major life and societal transitions.

Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert is an Akademische Rätin (associate professor) in the Chair of Adult Education at the University of Augsburg, Germany. After having studied in Ukraine and Germany, she researches migration and civic education (and indoctrination) in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the United States. She is co-director of the Institute for Civic Studies and Learning for Democracy, as well as founder and director of the NGO German-Ukrainian Dialogue.

Renee Owen is Assistant Professor of Education Leadership and Adult Learning at Southern Oregon University and Co-editor of *The Holistic Education Review*. Dr. Owen's research links transformative learning and development of leaders and educators with holistic practices and socially just systemic change.