

Sarah A. Miller  
*The Institute of Cultural Affairs*

## *Empowering School Communities with Facilitative Leadership*

*The Neighborhood Academy of the Institute of Cultural Affairs is a training program for youth and adults from a defined geographic area who are engaged or want to become engaged in efforts to make their neighborhood a better place to live. This article focuses on how the Academy has transformed a neighborhood school in Phoenix, Arizona, and its surrounding community.*

Five years ago, the rates of violence and crime in Central Phoenix were climbing and an increasing frequency of break-ins and car theft corresponded to a severe local strain of the national urban epidemic: white flight. As whites left, newly immigrated Spanish-speaking families settled in their place, bringing with them a sense of isolation from the foreign “system”—including the school. Many spoke no English. An untold number were illegal residents.

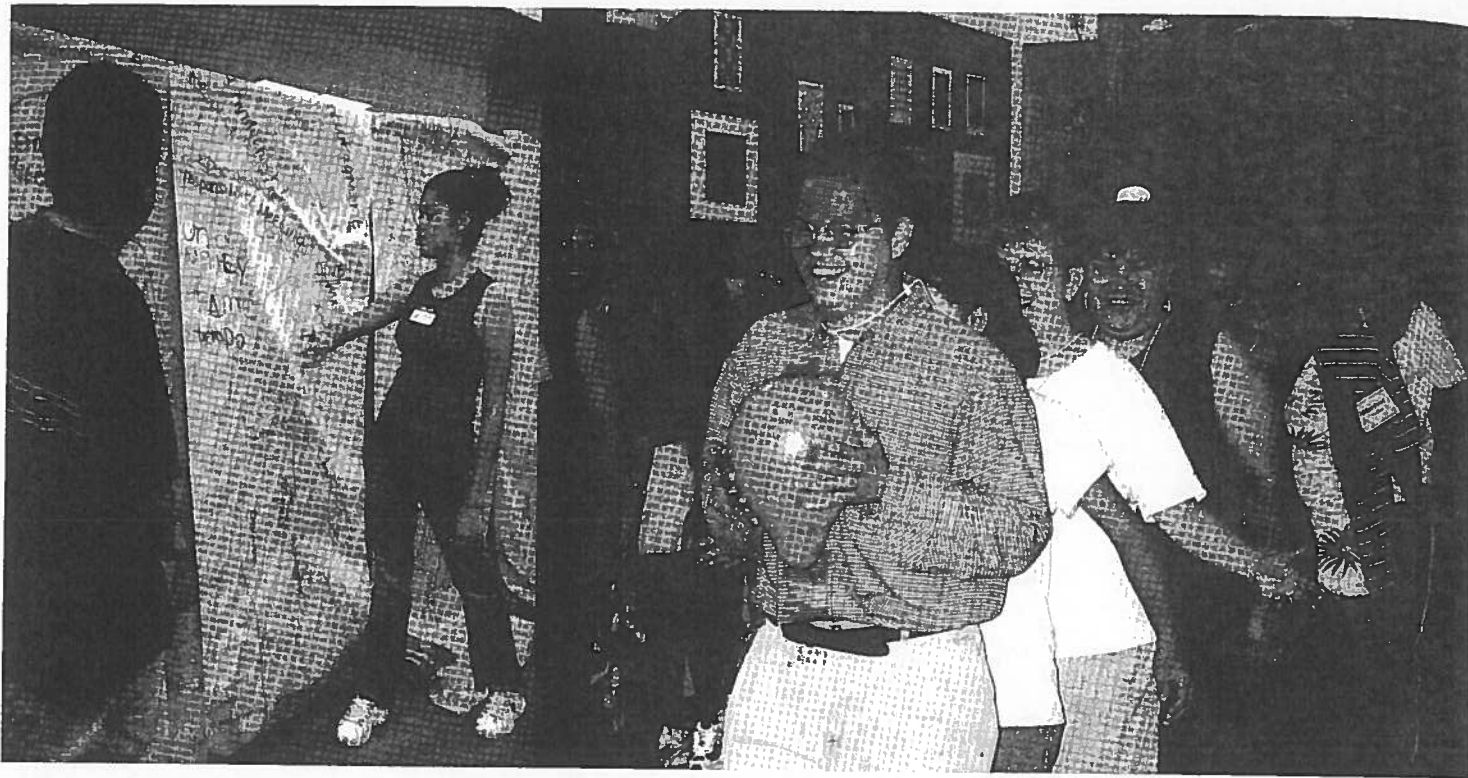
A neighborhood school, Machan Elementary, also faced a host of challenges: a new student population with unique needs, dwindling participation in the Parent-Teacher Organization, and acute cases of burn-out among the few parents who took on leadership roles. Given this scenario, Machan teachers and administrators could have ignored the question of leadership entirely—but they understood that the success of their children depended on the safety and vitality of the neighborhood they lived in. They also understood that, with the right tools, more parents could take on leadership roles and help tackle the problems. But how could they effectively make their vision a reality?

Enter the Institute of Cultural Affairs’ 12-week Neighborhood Academy—a program that could do what the school alone could not: break down perceived boundaries and expand the impact of learning by bringing the neighborhood into the classroom and vice versa.



# Academy

Machan Community Fair, May 2000.



Youth/adult partnership exercise demonstrates the workshop method from Technology of Participation (Machan, fall 2000.)

### Background

The Neighborhood Academy (Academy) is implemented in collaboration with a community-based partner organization—schools, nonprofit agencies, coalitions, etc.—whose work would benefit from the development of local leadership and expanded participation in decision making around local issues. The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) had two partners in its venture at Machan Elementary School: the Machan Healthy Community Partnership, a neighborhood coalition grounded at the school, and local facilitators from Neighborhood Partners, a network of 19 neighborhood partnerships in Phoenix's low-income communities, defined by elementary school attendance zones.

The Academy's mission is to empower neighbors of all ages and cultural backgrounds to serve as effective local leaders equipped with the facilitation skills, confidence, and connections with local resources to serve as effective agents of positive change in their communities. To realize this vision, core groups of local youth and adult facilitative leaders engage in facilitating events that expand the circle of local decision making in community change initiatives through the use of ToP™ methods (see the sidebar on page 22). The Academy sets out with the following objectives:

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- To train a group of at least seven youth and seven adults in a curriculum grounded in ToP group facilitation methods and participatory strategies for community development
- To use the methods learned to plan and implement one project of the participants' own design and planning
  - To apply the philosophy of Community Youth Development to build strong, long-lasting youth-adult partnerships
  - To catalyze or strengthen a series of paradigm shifts:
    - from the need for hierarchical leadership to the need for facilitative leadership
    - from the need for a visionary leader who defines a path of change to the need for participatory community planning and action implementation
    - from reliance on outside resources to self-reliance and confidence that the best tools for change are already within one's own community
- To put in place a system of ongoing one-on-one mentoring and support of Academy alumni with the staff of community-based partner organizations



Machan Community Fair, May 2000.

Cultural development participants at work making presentations.

In some communities, one 12-week program provides sufficient momentum to respond to the challenge faced by the community-based organization. More frequently, however, and as is the case with Machan, multiple Academies—each with a mix of new and returning participants that build on the strengths of the one before—are needed to build strong skills and genuinely expand local participation. Machan's first Academy was held in the spring of 1997; the fourth was completed in April of this year.

### Opening the Circle

*We've crossed over to more than 50 people trained. Our population doesn't attend something by reading a piece of paper. They come because of word of mouth, so it takes a little longer. But now that there's a real public awareness of what the Academy is, it's starting to make a difference on many levels in this community.*

—Kelly Draper

These remarks, made by the vice principal of Machan, speak to the significant changes evident in the community at the conclusion of the third Academy. My notes from

a typical evening during the fourth Academy show further progress:

*Just after 6 PM, all 16 participants are already gathered in the school library for implementation planning for their community fair, the event they've chosen to put their skills to work. Eight participants are under 25 years of age, two are over 50, and four speak only Spanish. Members of each subgroup stand up before the group and present the components of the plan they have committed to. Each component is represented on a half-sheet of paper that is added to the sprawling yellow implementation chart on the wall that represents their collective vision. What's happening is not just the planning of a community fair; it's the planting of a new kind of leadership.*

Instead of waiting for the "visionary leader" to appear at the table, the Academy operates on the alternative premise that the energy and motivation for change is continuously germinating, particularly among those who are too often considered the least likely suspects: high school students, monolingual Spanish-speakers, single parents, parents working multiple jobs, and the elderly.

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special purpose is to provide the facilitation tools for translating this energy and motivation into action—our into the hands of any community member brave enough to take a seat at the table.

Indeed, within the Academy, there are opportunities for all levels of participation: for both leadership and support roles, for those who are familiar with “the system” and for those who must develop skills more gradually, for those who speak Spanish and for those who do not. Linda Welch, a retired occupational therapist, joined the Academy because she wanted to be more effective in her stewardship of the local Neighborhood Association. She learned an important lesson early on:

*To be effective in the Neighborhood Association, the leaders should be bilingual. There is a lot of potential in the community but I am at a loss to mobilize and motivate people to participate without working with others.*

Now Linda is focused on recruiting others to participate in both the Neighborhood Association and the Academy.

Machan administrators also recognized that youth, especially former Machan students, were prime candidates for leadership positions, and further understood that a programmatic focus on youth development would be quite beside the point of addressing issues that concern the community as a whole. Young, old, Hispanic, Anglo, male, female, college-educated, and nominally uneducated participants sit around the same table and rotate roles as discussion leaders, workshop facilitators, and team-

building activity leaders. Inevitably, peer relationships establish themselves across the spectrum. Fifteen-year-old Laura Torres is a Machan graduate for whom the most valuable component of the Academy was

*... working with adults and not just teenagers. The activities made us all get to know each other and I got to know so many people I would never have known just because they weren't my age. They were serious and took me seriously and we did better work because of that.*

At the community fair that concluded the fourth Academy, three participants—Jorge Garcia, a steel worker in his early 20s; Rosa Weisel, a Spanish-speaking mother of two young Machan students; and Roberta Terrazas, the school's new parent-teacher liaison—introduced themselves to over 300 attendants. Jorge invited the entire community to an upcoming local strategic planning event at which he would be a cofacilitator. Afterwards, he likened the experience to “getting off the bench and going up to bat.”

### From Motivation to Action

As the Academy (or *la Academia*) became part of Machan's indigenous vocabulary, participants integrated themselves into a variety of local leadership roles, not only within the school and Parent-Teacher Organization, but also in the Neighborhood Associations, local church tutoring programs, and countless other activities. ICA and Neighborhood Partners provide the structured technical assistance and basic support that participants need to

## The Institute of Cultural Affairs

The mission of the Institute of Cultural Affairs USA is to expand social innovation, participation, and community building in all sectors of society. ICA began its work on the west side of Chicago in 1963 and is a member of ICA International. ICA USA works with its national network of trainers and partners to provide corporations, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, schools, neighborhood associations, and other community groups with training and consultative services grounded in the Technology of Participation (ToP™). ICA USA's vision is of a nationwide movement supporting effective teamwork in the work-

place and expanded participation in decision making in civil society. The Institute's special purpose is to put the tools for facilitating these changes in people's hands.

**What is ToP?** ToP is a set of structured facilitation methods created by ICA to cultivate maximum group participation. Distinct ToP methods are designed to achieve specific group missions, such as meaningful discussion, decision making, planning, team building, and conflict resolution. Among ToP methods' core benefits is that the facilitator need not possess any external authority or expertise. As such, the methods are particularly empowering for young people and members of other marginalized groups. ToP methods have proved successful in a remark-

ably broad range of groups, from corporate, nonprofit, and government-based working teams to self-selected teams of village residents and urban neighbors throughout the 35 countries in which ICA is located.

**What is facilitative leadership?** In ICA-speak, those who learn the ToP methodology and use it in the world to effect positive change are “facilitative leaders.” The term is meant to pose a contrast with a more common term and practice—hierarchical leadership. Instead of relying on credentials earned and unearned, the facilitative leader need only be adept at applying some fundamental facilitation methods in situations where they are required.

translate their motivation and new skills into meaningful action. Consider the following examples:

- Rosa Weisel led the PTA through a facilitated conversation about the question of school uniforms before it came to a vote and diffused tensions between parents by giving each one the opportunity to be heard.
- Laura Torres used the “workshop method” to help her Hispanics in Action club decide as a group how a field trip would be managed.
- Jorge Garcia led his church’s youth group through a series of workshops on peer pressure.

During the fourth Academy, one event in particular confirmed for Kelly Draper that the movement toward expanded local participation and action in Machan had arrived. Sylvia Benitez, an Academy participant and Head Start teacher, along with other Neighborhood Academy participants and graduates, mobilized a complex campaign against the Proposition 203 Anti-Bilingual Education Initiative that would have banned teaching in Spanish at the school. A group of Machan parents, many of whom had been through the Academy or participated in associated events, lined up at a school district board meeting to convey the need for bilingual educational opportunities for their children. They spoke so forcefully that the assistant superintendent told Kelly Draper it was “a groundbreaking night for the district.”

Draper adds,

*To this day, the perception of people at district is that Lynn [Davey, principal] and I are back here pulling strings; but we often don't even know what's happening. It's all coming from the parent base. It really confirms that that experience of standing up in front of a group at the Academy translates.*

As a direct result of such impactful parent participation at this and other school board meetings, the district has recently provided Machan with a grant of \$125,000 to support their community programs.

### Lasting Results

*Already the community has changed. One person at a time, one new leader stands up and puts into practice what he has learned. At the moment the change is singular. But in time it will extend throughout the community, on an extensive scale.*

—Jorge Garcia

The Academy is much more than a program; it's the beginning of a neighborhood's transformation. Participants who have fully participated in the Academy graduate at the end of the 12-week program in a ceremony open

to the community. A system is in place for ongoing one-on-one coaching by ICA and Neighborhood Partners staff to help graduates facilitate meetings, organize events, or otherwise put into practice the skills learned during the Academy. The facilitator and trainer role is thus formally and informally turned over to graduates—indeed, the success of the training is ultimately measured by the extent to which ICA and Neighborhood Partners trainers cease to be necessary. The upcoming fifth Academy at Machan will, in fact, be facilitated solely by Academy graduates, with ICA and Neighborhood Partners providing only marginal technical assistance.

The Neighborhood Academy catalyzes a process of local leadership development with cumulative results ultimately measured in months and years. The diverse group of local role models and community leaders, strong youth-adult partnerships and paradigm shifts become positive local institutions as motivation and skills are translated into action.

The Academy has served as this catalytic bridge between schools, community organizations, and the all too commonly fragmented communities they serve, in numerous other diverse western locales, including Somerton, AZ; San Luis Río, Colorado, Mexico; San Diego, CA; and Adelanto, CA. In Phoenix, where immigrant populations shift frequently and indiscriminately due to fear of searches and deportation by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and as schools like Machan become default neighborhood loci, the Academy is a particularly appropriate venture for community schools. A plan is in place to hold Academies in five additional Neighborhood Partnerships in Phoenix over the course of the coming year. Through the efforts of Sylvia Benitez and the Director of Southwest Headstart Luzmila Luz, Southwest Head Start is also securing funding for two Academies in neighboring school districts. Interest in the Academy is also germinating outside the Southwest, including in Chicago, San Francisco, and Connecticut.

Expansion of the Neighborhood Academy program is fueled by its adaptability to local situations. As ICA explores replication of this catalytic process in new locations and contexts, we welcome critics, champions, and partners.



Sarah A. Miller is a junior at Yale University. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Institute of Cultural Affairs, USA.

For further information on The Neighborhood Academy, ICA, and ToP™, visit [www.ica-usa.org](http://www.ica-usa.org) or contact:

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