

A hand wearing a black sleeve and a brown watch holds a clear glass jar filled with river water. The jar has a decorative, faceted stopper. The background shows a wide river with a sandy bank in the foreground and a line of trees on the opposite shore under a clear blue sky.

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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IN REVIEW

SHOWING UP (FOR EACH OTHER)

By Lynn Peemoeller

Editor's note: This article was written in January 2024.

Here in the Middle Mississippi River region, one thing we've managed to do well is to show up for each other. It didn't necessarily start out that way. Our process has been what adrienne maree brown identifies as nonlinear and iterative. [1] Fractal, even. The Mid-River Field School,

one part of the larger Mississippi River Open School for Kinship project that includes hubs along the length of the river, came together as a multigenerational group of artists, community leaders, and botanical thinkers during 2022, just as we began to see COVID-19 in the rearview mirror. Since then, it has become a shapeshifting project, moving like water in between the cracks



Sharing a simple outdoor meal. Image courtesy of Lynn Peemoeller.

of our broken city to foster creative connectivity and make meaning out of the river landscape for ourselves and others. Finding ways to come together, build shared values, and self-determine outcomes for our work has been an ongoing

challenge to, and a strength of, our project. Here are some reflections on our best practices for showing up and building community with each other.

Starting Out

Sometimes one of the hardest (and easiest) things you'll ever do is to just show up. This is especially true when you've been invited to participate in some kind of field school group activity that is loosely defined as creative, emergent, and self-determinate. *What is this? Where do I fit in? What do I have to offer? Is this a good use of my time?* These are all relevant questions and reasons to have doubts. And yet, suspending that doubt and putting forth the simple intention and act of showing up begins to weave a future of possibilities built at the speed of trust.

There is a lot of invisible work going on in building the scaffolding that holds together the precious first meetings upon which project work is built. As an organizer, one key goal I had for the initial gathering was to provide as much of a vision as possible without predetermining outcomes. We relied on an ally—a trained facilitator—to help guide us through the first group meeting. We wanted people to feel engaged, seen, and rewarded for showing up. The results were successful. From those first few meetings, we generated a list of group values. We are deeply grateful to all the people who showed up and put forth good faith efforts to build a collective vision.

We envisioned the Mid-River Field School as an empowering hub for creative individuals and cultural institutions, one where culture bearers from the region could unite, collaborate, and thrive within a supportive community. In other words, unlike what you would see with a predetermined curriculum, this “education” was centered around relationship building. Much of the Field School content examines the confluence of race, extraction, and environment in alignment with the goals of the larger Mississippi River Open School for Kinship and Social Exchange. Through a process of social engagement, the Field School has supported collective narratives and gatherings that challenge previous histories and examine our present moment.

Project-based examples of this work include a freedom village gathering on Black placemaking in the historic Black town of Brooklyn, Illinois; a wild food foraging series and weekly river blessings with the Native Women's Care Circle; shared garden site solidarity work and seed and plant swaps; a printing of the American Bottom Gazette; and an artistic look at East St. Louis through land and language.

Making Time

Meeting in person has great strength, and we have come to protect and use this in-person time wisely for special occasions. Let's face it: to meet in person frequently is unrealistic for work that does not fully fund and organize our daily lives. Shout out to those with limited mobility, those with empty gas tanks, those with young children

at home, those who work remotely from different time zones, and anyone and everyone who is just plain busy with their own work.

Thank goodness for Zoom, which gave us the capacity to host virtual meetings via the institution where some of us work. Syncing schedules

and working with remote partners took some time. It was at least one year into the Field School work before we started to host biweekly Zoom meetings on Friday mornings. At first, there were only one or two people present, but we stuck with

it, and after some months we started to build momentum. Meetings are still a place not only to discuss project work but to check in with each other, face some difficult truths, prioritize needs, and offer supportive words and comfort.

Making Kin

The Mid-River Field School project is life-adjacent and yet fully immersive. We show up with our families and become family to one another. Asking people to carve out time for extra things deserves reciprocity. Yes, there is some funding provided through our Mellon grant supporting the Mississippi River Open School for Kinship and Social Exchange, and that is essential. But what really drives the commitment to making time is not only shared values and shared vision but the feeling of relationship or *being* in relationship with each other. Two years into this project, we are cultivating care, compassion, and reciprocity for each other.

Being in relationship with each other feels very much like kinship, or what among the Anishinaabe people operates as “a web of relationships that [enables] agreements which

is essentially a family-like way of defining some of the bonds that connect diverse entities to one another.”[2]

Supporting each other and sharing resources has become an important part of our meeting time. For many, it’s a check-in. For those who have been present, it has become a place to work out the nuances of institutional power and privilege that are inescapable in our lives. Kinship has helped us navigate these conversations with gratitude and helps lead us back together again so we can show up for each other. As adrienne marie brown explains in *Emergent Strategy*, “what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system.”[3] Perhaps this intention will spread out through our efforts and seed new generations of field work.

Seeing It Through

As we began our final year of the Field School project, we leaned into our relations. For some, it’s a starting point leading toward a longer and deeper process of outcomes. For others, it’s a midpoint in a collection of work, building a body of evidence that has touched and defined our place along the river. Others move deeper into the groove of leaving their mark upon this place.

Collectively, it adds up to what Lucy Lippard might call “multicenteredness.”[4] Our ongoing goal is to share out this work, weaving a web of tangible and ethereal situations and cultural tools that help us continue to explore, support, and define our Mid-River environment. We can only do this by showing up.

Best Practices for Showing Up

- Acknowledge elders and any special needs that they may have.
- Food makes it better. We all need a snack. This makes a difference and helps people feel welcome.
- Meet in person when possible, in a central location with free parking. We frequently use the community rooms at a branch of the local public library.
- Share resources for internet accessibility and virtual meeting technology.
- Make paperwork as easy as possible. Do it one-on-one in person to make sure it's done correctly.
- Check in on folks. Make time for one-on-one phone calls or texts to see how they are doing.

Footnotes

[1] adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (AK Press, 2017).

[2] Kyle Powys Whyte, "An Ethic of Kinship," in *Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations: Vol. 5 Practice*, eds. Gavin Van Horn, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and John Hausdoerffer (Center for Humans and Nature Press, 2021), 30.

[3] brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 36

[4] Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (The New Press, 1997).

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About the Author

Lynn engages communities and individuals in project design drawing from the depth of relational possibilities embedded in food systems, botanical histories, and interspecies landscape ecology. With this in mind, her role creates situations for embodied encounter and experience so that we may build and craft affinity narratives about who we are and where we come from. Through these practices, her wish is to cultivate a sense of belonging in this world for herself and others.