As regular readers of Connections know, the Kettering Foundation organizes its work into research on citizens, communities, and institutions. Each year, the foundation reviews and evaluates possibilities for new lines of research through the “lens” of one of the areas. The current focus is through the lens of community, a term which refers to the places where people develop networks of civic relationships to achieve goals vital to their individual and collective interests. In communities, people educate future generations in shared norms and essential skills, protect themselves from threats, and create the conditions that allow them to prosper economically. The interactions among the people of a place—joined in ever-changing alliances of civic associations and formal institutions—are what determine the capacity of a community to address those goals. Maintaining and building the community is a matter of maintaining and building these relationships.

Early in the current review, it became clear that behind many of the concerns about the role of citizens in politics is a critical and largely unrecognized problem: the idea of communities as arenas of collective acting is increasingly unrecognized. And it is not only that that frame of reference is missing in the formal institutions and agencies charged with serving the public interest; as recent reports by Richard Harwood show, the insight is lacking even in the community-based organizations that have historically been the entryways for citizens into public life. (See the review by Connie Crockett on p. 29.)

One symptom of the problem can be seen in the widely documented reports of people’s sense of their collective political impotence. People feel there is little chance that they, or “people like them,” can do anything to act effectively on their concerns. What is the problem? Our review recognized one well-researched part of the challenge: citizen-directed civic initiatives are often blocked by formal organizations and government agencies. But there appears to be an even more fundamental underlying problem. The thin notion of the role of public life in community leaves many such initiatives unimagined and thus untried. With that problem in mind, we identified the logical follow-up question as the overarching theme of the year’s review: how can the concept of communities as arenas for collective acting be recognized and illuminated? The question is motivated, of course, by the foundation’s primary interest in how people can more effectively marshal their civic resources in order to shape their collective future.

The following essays provide a partial record of what we are finding. They highlight the challenges faced by citizens, civic associations, and formal institutions in identifying and making practical use of the concept of communities as places of public work. They also provide a sense of the various networks of exchange through which the foundation works. The foundation conducts its research with community groups, government agencies, research organizations, and scholars through joint-learning agreements. Throughout the year, workshops bring together people working in related areas to exchange findings and make sense of what they mean. In what follows, readers will find what we hope are illuminating references to the various ways the foundation goes about its work.

Based on an understanding of research through networks of exchange, we want to encourage readers to share with us their own experiences and suggestions for others who might collaborate in the research. Authors of the essays that follow were encouraged to write with that sort of reader in mind, which suggests posing questions rather than answering them. You are encouraged to join the conversation, through the Readers’ Forum found at www.kettering.org.

—Randall Nielsen
Looking Back/Looking Ahead at Communities
David Mathews

A Need for Human Logic in Education
Bob Cornett

Taking a Look at Organic Community-Level Politics
Derek Barker, Gina Paget, and Dorothy Battle

Developing Civic Practices in South African Communities
Teddy Nemeroff

Community Change and Action Research: The Unrealized Potential of Cooperative Extension
Alice Diebel

What’s Changed? Are Citizens Reestablishing Education Ownership?
Patricia Moore Harbour

Communities as Educators: A Report on the November 2007 Public and Public Education Workshop
Connie Crockett

Self-Organizing and Community Politics
Phil Stewart

Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs: What Should Our Community Do?
Bob McKenzie

Public Work vs. Organizational Mission
Connie Crockett

Studies of a Role for Communities in the Face of Catastrophe
Paloma Dallas

Books Worth Reading
Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy
By Diana C. Mutz, reviewed by Matthew Johnson

Innovation: The Missing Dimension
By Richard K. Lester and Michael J. Piore, reviewed by Randall Nielsen
Fostering discussion across political divisions is of great concern to those interested in promoting democracy. So, too, is stimulating political participation. In *Hearing the Other Side*, Mutz seeks to understand how these two ideas interact. In short, her research suggests that an extremely activist political culture cannot also be a heavily deliberative one.

Mutz’s work shows that there are fundamental incompatibilities between theories of participatory democracy and theories of deliberative democracy. She depicts the participatory model of democracy as promoting political action, party membership, and social movements, all of which depend on like-minded citizens finding common cause together and taking up arms against societal issues. The deliberative model, by contrast, seeks to bring people with different values, aspirations, and viewpoints together to decide what should be done about a problem and build consensus toward action.

Like-minded people can spur one another on to collective action and promote the kind of passion and enthusiasm that are central to motivating political participation. Although diverse political networks foster a better understanding of multiple perspectives on issues and encourage political tolerance, they discourage political participation, particularly among those who are averse to conflict. Those with diverse networks refrain from public participation in part because of the social discomfort that accompanies publicly taking a stand that friends or colleagues may oppose.

Instead of suggesting that what we really need are closer, more tight-knit communities, with denser networks of mutual obligation, her findings suggest American society would benefit from a larger number of weak ties, that is, relationships that permit looser connections to be maintained on an ongoing basis. Differences of political opinion are indeed more easily maintained and more beneficially aired with one’s dentist than with a close friend or family member.

Mutz lauds the American workplace, despite the tremendous negative publicity that currently plagues it, because she believes the American workplace is actually performing an important public service simply by establishing a social context in which diverse groups of people are forced into daily interactions with one another. That interaction often involves discussions of political matters with coworkers who are not of like mind. In fact, Mutz says, “the workplace appears to be the social context in which political conversation across lines of difference most often takes place” (55).

It is important to note that Mutz’s research focuses on organic deliberation that happens naturally in the workplace or the grocery store, not the formal deliberation that occurs in organized forums, such as citizen juries or deliberative polls. Nonetheless, Mutz brings forth concerning empirical research on the ever-important topic of political action in a democracy and the increasing tension between active citizenship and diversity.

— Matthew Johnson

Matthew Johnson is a research assistant with the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at mjohnson@kettering.org.
Innovation: The Missing Dimension
By Richard K. Lester and Michael J. Piore
Harvard University Press, 2006

The authors of this book are professors of economics (Lester) and management (Piore) at MIT. Innovation reviews their research into the practices that they see as “the real wellsprings of creativity in the U.S. economy—the capacity to integrate across organizational, intellectual, and cultural boundaries, the capacity to experiment, and the habits of thought that allow us to make sense of radically ambiguous situations and move forward in the face of uncertainty.” Readers will find that while the focus is on the ways that new products and processes are developed in business environments, the insights are relevant to understanding innovation in any group environment.

The authors argue that innovation is a function of two different but interrelated processes, which they call analysis and interpretation. Analysis is based on clearly defined projects with measurable goals and clear points of closure. Interpretation is a process akin to conversation, based on conditions of ambiguity rather than focused problem solving. Open-ended and ongoing, interpretive processes identify possibilities and opportunities that can then become the subjects of analysis. While both are critical to innovation, the authors emphasize the tension between the creative emphasis on ambiguity and the rational approach to problem solving.

The authors argue that the messy interactions that make up interpretation are the “missing dimension” in our understanding of how groups of people innovate. By “missing” they do not mean that it is missing in practice, but that it goes generally unrecognized by those who study and attempt to facilitate more effective innovation. They explore case studies that reveal the challenge of innovation to be akin to what researchers in other fields have identified as “wicked” or “adaptive” problems. When groups of people in a business environment are dealing with a challenge that is ambiguous to a degree that even a shared vocabulary for describing it is lacking, they come to shared understanding through dialogue. Note, for example, the authors’ discussion of how business managers describe the interactions involved in the process of innovation:

Our respondents clearly had trouble describing the nonanalytical dimension of the process in which they were engaged. But when they actually did characterize it in a way that seemed to fit, that activity sounded an awful lot like a conversation. And what the respondents seemed to be doing was managing that conversation. The way that new designs came to be initiated, the way that new styles emerged or trends in style were “recognized,” the way that problems came to be identified and clarified to the point where a solution could be discussed was through conversations among people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives.

Communication during this conversational phase is often punctuated by misunderstandings or ambiguities; indeed, an accepted vocabulary to describe the new product may not even exist. Yet this ambiguity in the conversation is the resource out of which new ideas emerge. And something is lost if that conversation is closed off too soon.

This book is worth reading, both for the insights it provides about innovation in business environments and for what it suggests about a central interest of Kettering Foundation research: the conditions that encourage—or stifle—innovation in political practice.

—Randall Nielsen

Randall Nielsen is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at nielsen@kettering.org.
HAVE YOUR SAY... Discuss the ideas explored in Connections in Kettering’s Readers’ Forum at www.kettering.org
Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey
From the editors of the Higher Education Exchange,
David W. Brown and Deborah Witte

Ten thoughtful theorists and practitioners address how higher education prepares citizens for public life, how (and why) universities engage in the larger community, and how we can rediscover the civic roots of higher education. This book of essays is a contribution to a resurgent movement bent on strengthening higher education’s democratic mission and fostering a more democratic culture throughout American society.
Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue

By Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

Harriger and McMillan’s “experiment is significant because it was informed by an acute sense of the troubles facing modern democracy. . . . Students in the experiment discovered another dimension to democracy and a new role for themselves as citizens.”

—David Mathews, president, Kettering Foundation

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Findings from the Classroom
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to "the problems behind the problems."

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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Editor
Randall Nielsen

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

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