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 untired. 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

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Engage others, exchange stories
in the Readers’ Forum on www.kettering.org
A Need for Human Logic in Education

By Bob Cornett

The Situation

Hardly anyone is fully satisfied with the condition of public education in America. Dropout rates are too high, the “equity gap” is unacceptable, many excellent schoolteachers feel that they are being treated as robots on an assembly line, and there are still more deficiencies. The real problem, however—the underlying barrier to effective learning—is that we’re expecting government institutions to do a job that such institutions can’t do by themselves.

New York Times columnist David Brooks recently used some terminology that I find helpful; he contrasted bureaucratic logic with human logic. Bureaucratic logic tells us that the way to improve education is to anoint bigger bosses, send more compartmentalizing mandates down through the hierarchy, require more tests that put more fear in the teachers and students, and otherwise try harder to make people do things.

Human logic, conversely, takes us in exactly the opposite direction. Effective learning, according to human logic (and according to objective scholarship), requires integrating information from many sources, requires the active and enthusiastic energies of the learners, and requires imagination, not mere information. Effective learners, above all, learn to learn. In order to do so, they must be full partners in the learning enterprise.

Illusions

The poet W. H. Auden identifies our problem:

We would rather be ruined than changed,
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.

Auden prompts me to acknowledge two illusions of my own. First, I long took for granted that the way to improve learning was to improve schooling. I would have known better if I had stopped to think: we adults have spent only a small portion of our lives in school, and only a small part of what we’ve learned could possibly have come from school. But I did not know better; and, therefore, when I thought about ways to improve young people’s learning, I kept coming back to my own image of schooling. I had been fortunate—I had the benefit of many teachers who were not only competent and dedicated but also were good role models—but the system itself, which gave little or no recognition to the learning that took place outside the classroom, was the product of bureaucratic logic. That system, as I now realize, had provided me with my own image of schooling. I had been fortunate—I had the benefit of many teachers who were not only competent and dedicated but also were good role models—but the system itself, which gave little or no recognition to the learning that took place outside the classroom, was the product of bureaucratic logic. That system, as I now realize, had provided me with my frame of reference and, as a consequence, I was trying to use bureaucratic logic to do a human logic job.

The second illusion I acknowledge is that I had a high opinion of myself and of people like me. I have spent a big part of my career in and around governments at all levels. We were well motivated and competent (we believed); when we reached a conclusion, we were almost certainly right (according to my logic at the time). That was an illusion, of course, but it took a long time for me to get beyond this and other ego-based illusions.

I cite my own illusions, not because they are special but because they are quite ordinary. I’ve learned, partly from the writings of great thinkers and partly just by looking around, that my illusions are shared to at least some degree by most adults. And because the illusions are shared by so many people, they infect the body politic; and, from inside the body politic the illusions provide fuel that further entrenches bureaucratic logic. Pogo had it right: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Our illusions, I now realize, are the basic source of our problems in public education.

Solutions

Our nation’s strength has, from the very start, been in our communities. But, having said that, I know of many of people who would, and do, put their illusions (and their bureaucratic logic) ahead of children’s learning. Right now, as an important case in point, the debate in Washington over No Child Left Behind is being dominated by the illusion that better bureaucratic techniques will give us better education. While I’m in favor of jiggling the bureaucratic apparatus—it needs it—we will make real and permanent progress only when human logic and human values outweigh bureaucratic logic and bureaucratic values.

The application of human logic can be found everywhere in community-based endeavors that connect the generations. I recently witnessed a beautiful example in a small community park in Lexington, Kentucky, where several hundred people gather each Tuesday evening during the summer to participate in a bluegrass music “jamboree.” All ages were there, from those in their 90s to small babies. The evening I was there, the band on the stage consisted of 10 young people from a rural Kentucky school; they were excellent. Those youngsters then helped start a jam session to encourage other youngsters to learn to play bluegrass music. I noticed one granddaddy showing his three-year-old grandson how to pick up trash and take it to the garbage can. There was
no compartmentalizing, no hierarchies, no coercion—just people sharing their humanity.

I fully concede that where we are is nowhere close to where we need to go. In the case of that little neighborhood jamboree, as a typical example, there is no connection with the schools in the area but, even if some of the teachers and students were to have some involvement with the project, the school hierarchy would likely see the project as only marginally relevant to the school’s mission. (Test scores would likely be the main concern of the school hierarchy.) Further, even in those situations where the school and the community have managed to develop an effective partnership, that partnership would almost certainly be invisible at levels where public policies are set—the big bosses in capital cities would be unlikely to know about such local projects.

Furthermore, as perhaps the most complicating factor of all, some degree of bureaucratic logic will always be needed: we will continue to need school buildings, buses, classrooms, assessments, and the like, and bureaucratic procedures therefore will continue to be needed to manage such things, including managing the money that will always be needed. And, aside from management issues, some public policies need to be set at high levels of government; as a reminder of this need, we had legally segregated schools until the national government ended that demeaning practice. Our objective, thus, cannot be merely to get rid of bureaucratic logic and procedures, we must create arrangements that effectively mesh the bureaucratic and the human.

Temptations

I warn that we will be tempted to get off course—I’ve learned that the hard way.

The most pervasive temptation is to make deals with bureaucratic logic; and money is most often the initial cause of that temptation. Some money is needed for just about any project, and the bureaucratic hierarchy has control of money. It is therefore entirely natural that citizens who want to start community-based projects tend to approach the hierarchy for money, and it is also natural that the hierarchy tends to say “no,” unless the project serves a purpose based upon bureaucratic logic.

Effective learning, according to human logic, requires integrating information from many sources, requires the active and enthusiastic energies of the learners, and requires imagination, not mere information. Effective learners, above all, learn to learn. In order to do so, they must be full partners in the learning enterprise.
pretense gives us citizens an excuse to avoid responsibility—we can sit on our hands without needing to feel guilty. And we don’t even have to blame ourselves when the job doesn’t get done—we can blame the “experts.”

We have no ethical choice. We are required by our deepest instincts to connect ourselves and our communities with the young people and their learning. This requirement extends to all children, rich and poor, city and country, black and white, brown and red.

When we citizens absolve ourselves of responsibility, we open the door to another temptation—the temptation to tolerate intimidation. The bureaucratic hierarchy has power over public school educators—the hierarchy, after all, controls the paychecks (and the top-down mandates). When we citizens neuter ourselves, this leaves nobody to speak for the children and their communities except the teachers and their bosses. This, consequently, leaves the bureaucratic hierarchy free to intimidate as it will, which, in turn, means that connections between school and community must serve bureaucratic values.

Still another temptation is to be insensitive to the vulnerabilities of other people. I’ve experienced this temptation myself. I know, from my own experience in and around governments, that the political and bureaucratic hierarchies defer to “We the People” when we insist that they do so; and I therefore sometimes am tempted to help pull together coalitions of grandparents and other citizens to do some insisting. When I yield to that temptation, however, I run the risk of appearing to be no different from the bosses in the hierarchies; I can seem to be trying to use raw power to combat raw power.

I don’t like to think of myself as being insensitive, but I now realize that my own experience, much of which has been inside the world of power, is fundamentally different from the experience of people who have been the victims of power. I don’t believe I’m atypical; all of us find it hard to see the world from the vantage point of other people. Any time we’re tempted to discount the culture in children’s communities (especially low-income communities), we need to remind ourselves of the Indian schools that our government sponsored not too many years ago. Student learning must relate to the local culture because that local community—and not the bureaucratic hierarchy—must serve bureaucratic values.

We need community-based “public work” projects everywhere. And we need, as a matter of crucial importance, for dedicated adults in the communities to work as active partners with not only young people but with the best of the professional educators. By best I mean those educators, active and retired, whose commitment to children’s learning is so deep and firm that their human logic and values protect them from yielding to bureaucratic logic. Such partnerships can combine the wisdom of years, the professional knowledge of educators, the grassroots strength of democracy, the energy and creative skills of young people—and, above all, deep respect for the children.

I don’t know just how to create the kinds of partnerships we need. And I don’t know just what public policies will look like when our partnerships, with their human logic, assert themselves in the world of bureaucratic logic. I do know, however, that bureaucratic logic by itself will take us down a trail that nobody wants: Not even the corporate organizations that sometimes lead cheers for bureaucratic testing and other top-down controls really want passive workers who don’t know how to learn—and whose creativity has been diminished through coercion. Further, nobody wants good teachers to leave the profession because they’re forced to be robots on a monolithic assembly line.

I know something else: There are no grandparents, or people who think the way grandparents think, who would knowingly accept the notion that they have nothing to contribute to children’s learning. Policies that separate us older citizens from the younger generation, as our present bureaucratic policies do, are educationally wasteful—obviously and foolishly wasteful. And I know one more thing: there are no politicians who would knowingly and openly suggest that grandparents have no useful role in children’s education.

Community-based partnerships do something that nothing else can do as well: They produce knowledgeable citizens, the kind of citizens that know what’s going on. It is those knowledgeable citizens—plus the politicians who want to work with knowledgeable citizens—who will see to it that human logic and human values are respected. And once human logic and human values are respected, everything else falls into place.

The Case for Human Logic in Education

I asked one of my friends to sum up the case for human logic. Here’s his response: Every life is—and must be—lived in a community; adults and children alike. When hierarchies supersede or ignore those communities and their cultures (the major sources of the nutrients for living), they have diminished the preeminent life context which properly envelops each student’s life and fosters his individual reality.

I rest my case for human logic.

Bob Cornett is a retired bureaucrat and can be reached at onechildatatime@hotmail.com.
Kettering’s research has increasingly been concerned with democratic practices in the everyday life of communities. Researchers on staff and in our network have been observing the ebb and flow of ongoing decision-making and problem-solving routines in their communities. They hope to find stories of organic politics, driven by the interests, norms, and resources of the community rather than those of experts, outside organizations, and bureaucratic institutions. Our research attempts to answer the question, what kind of spontaneous, self-organizing, and self-regulating engagement in politics occurs in communities? We also hope to learn more about how this kind of politics either stops or moves forward at particular key moments. We suspect that Kettering’s findings on democracy will be more powerful if we can find examples of democratic practices moving forward in the informal networks of communities.

We are searching for examples of organic public politics that can be distinguished from formal politics in at least three ways. First, organic political engagement is spontaneous. It emerges out of everyday concerns of citizens in communities and occurs in places that are not explicitly named as “political,” such as churches and barber shops. As we have seen in the cases of ancient cultures around the world, organic politics is incorporated into the fabric of the community. Second, it is self-organizing. It is driven by the energy, initiative, and civic skills that exist throughout a community, rather than by the techniques of expert organizations or the resources of powerful bureaucracies. Third, it is self-regulating.

By Derek Barker, Gina Paget, and Dorothy Battle
Organic politics is regulated by norms that are implicitly stated and broadly understood. This is in contrast to formal politics, which is regulated by strict rules of order imposed by trained moderators or officials. We hope to find examples that meet these criteria, in contrast to the artificiality of well-intentioned interventions of experts and elites against the natural tendencies of communities.

Organic politics may not follow a linear, or step-by-step, plan, and it may overlap with irreconcilable conflicts or feelings of powerlessness. Researchers in our workshops have struggled to identify forces, but in public meetings the discussion has rarely progressed to thoughtful consideration of our options. Commitment to work together on a problem seen as affecting everyone has developed slowly. As one person put it in an e-mail message after several community meetings, “I am concerned . . . the types of meetings we have had so far do not allow for the rigorous discussion that needs to happen to make good decisions. I think there are several key issues that need to be addressed: affordable housing and housing diversity, green-belt protection, energy implications, commercial development in new developments. How can we deal with this situation in a way that doesn’t continue to fractionalize the community?”

A more recent effort is a hopeful sign that we are beginning to learn from all our efforts. A group of villagers, many of whom had participated in one or all of these conversations (albeit with different concerns, loyalties, and problem-solving approaches) has organized to support a process that addresses the problems as an interconnected whole rather than as separate crises. This is understood as requiring creativity and imagination by the entire village if it is to succeed.

These experiences have left me with several questions with the primary one being the following: How does the organic, spontaneous, self-organizing, and self-regulating work of disparate groups come together in a public discourse to make a difference in the life of a community?

Dorothy Battle reports on her experiences in Cincinnati, Ohio:

I have been studying the everyday political talk of people in my community. This kind of talk is organic, or natural. There are no techniques used to guide the conversations. The conversations are prompted by shared concerns amongst a group of people who gather in a range of everyday community spaces.

A recent experience manifesting organic talk was when people in my community became concerned about matters relating to education and schooling. An individual in my community contacted me, along with several other persons, concerning a newly formed education initiative. We talked amongst ourselves, and named the issue as the lack of broad community participation in setting an agenda for education and schooling. The idea was that people in our community would be invited to determine expected outcomes for the school district and hold the school board accountable for addressing those outcomes. We contacted one of the leaders of the initiative, pointed out that without broad community participation the initiative would likely not have the systemic change the initiative claimed as its mission. We had a series of meetings with the leader and his staff to figure out ways to broaden the participation. Commit-
ment and action regarding broadening the participation are reflected in the planning of what has come to be called community engagement.

The community engagement planning has become an issue in itself as well, in regards to whether the plan in its current form, if adopted by the initiative, will actually engage the community. This situation contributes to ongoing conversations in which the issues related to broad community participation in education and schooling are talked about in informal community settings.

The virtue of my embedded participation is that I am able to listen to, as well as create meaning with, people talking in real time in community settings about politics. My role as an embedded participant in organic community politics can serve to illustrate that people in their ordinary everyday lives engage in political talk, and at the same time, my work generates more questions. Some of the questions that arise from my work: How do people in their ordinary, everyday political talk discuss the choices to be made and address the tensions and trade-offs involved? What are the political narratives created by the everyday political talk of people in their communities? How does organic political talk contribute to substantive community change? When people talk politics in an organic manner, under what conditions does the talk turn to commitment and complementary action?

We continue to seek stories of spontaneous, self-organizing, and self-regulating political engagement in communities. Please share your experiences and help improve our understanding of communities and their role in making democracy work as it should.

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—Anne Colby, senior scholar, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
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By Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

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—David Mathews, president, Kettering Foundation

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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.”

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Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. The articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

Editor
Randall Nielsen

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

Design and Production
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.