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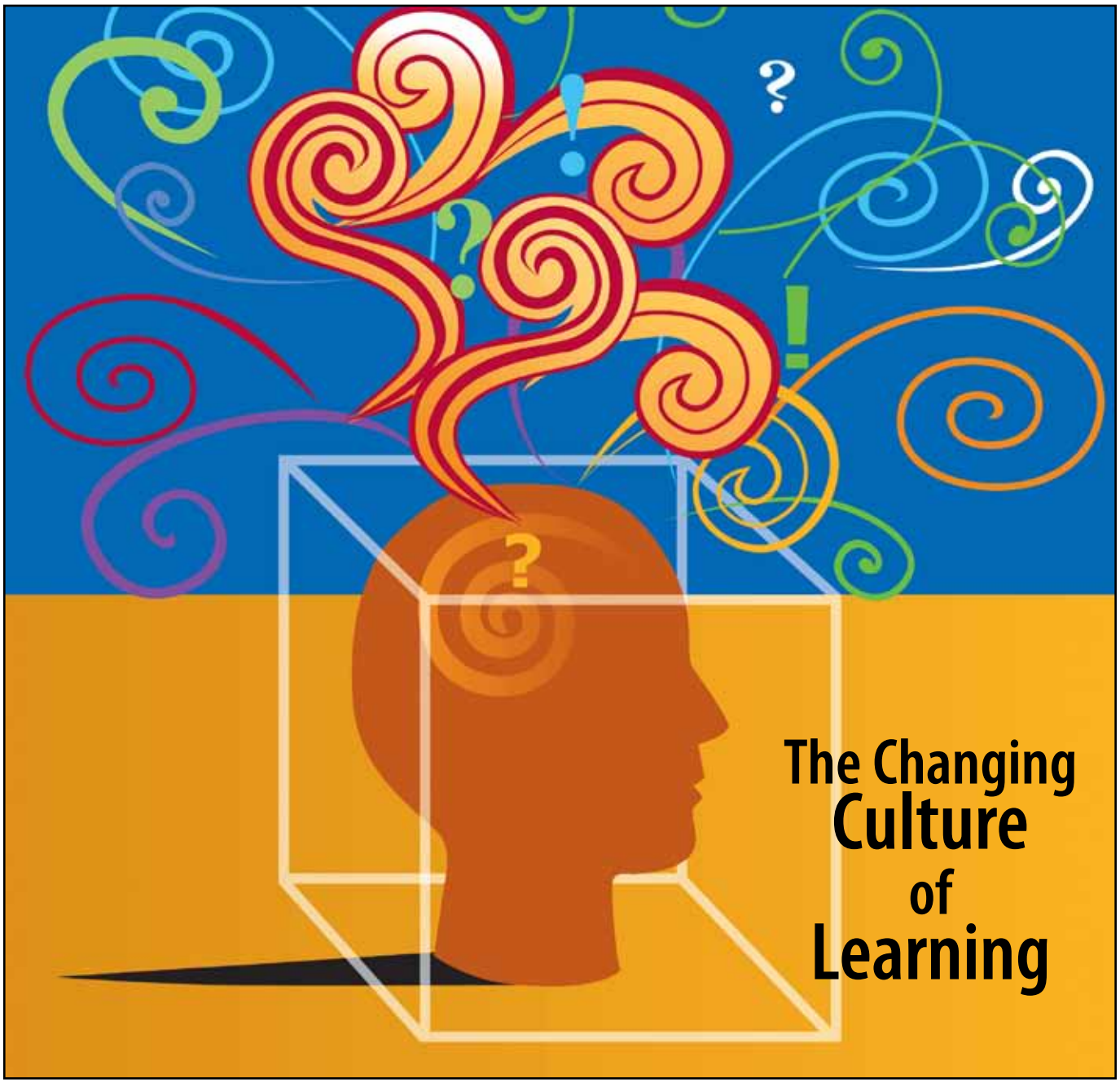
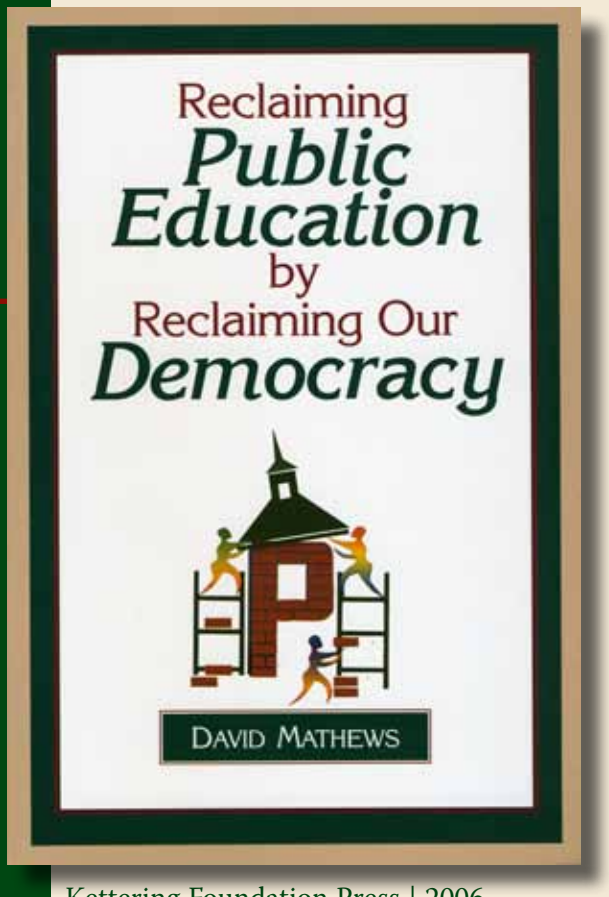


Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy

By David Mathews

In his most recent book, Kettering Foundation president David Mathews considers what citizens and educators alike want from public education and how they might come closer to getting it. Mathews examines the obstacles that block them, beginning with significant differences in the ways that citizens see problems of education and how professional educators and policymakers talk about them. Discussions of accountability, the achievement gap, vouchers, and the like don't always resonate with people's real concerns. Mathews argues that this has resulted in a deep chasm between citizens and the schools that serve them.

Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy updates Kettering's research findings, restates and expands on ideas raised in Mathews' earlier book, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* (Kettering Foundation Press, 1996), and adds material that illustrates how to build a public for public education.



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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."

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

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at **www.kettering.org**.

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A Diagnostic Approach *to* Learning-Based Change

By Randall Nielsen

Kettering Foundation studies the things that people need to do to fulfill their responsibilities in democratic governance. As such, democracy is seen not as a destination—which when reached will deliver particular outcomes—but as the ongoing journey of people struggling with challenges to their collective ability to rule themselves. The research is therefore focused on innovation in the key practices that define the roles of citizens in determining the direction and character of collective acting.

Those responsibilities can be especially daunting for people attempting to collectively respond to economic change. While people can and do respond individually to change in economic conditions, they often do not see ways that they, or anything they have access to, can affect the economic conditions in the places where they live. The economic futures of their communities can seem to be out of their control.

When widely shared, that sense of incapacity is a fundamental threat to the civic health of communities. The problem is not only that things that could improve economic conditions go undone, it is that the uncertainty and fear brought by economic change can lead people toward centralized or expert-driven means that promise quick relief. We see this in reports from places attempting the transition to more democratic society like Russia and South Africa. We have seen it in reports from places like Uniontown, Alabama, as well. It is a common version of the story of the sidelining of citizens as collective actors.

Yet we also know that places that have prospered through time are living histories of civic innovation and resilience. Prosperity emerges in environments where people can discover ways to create change by recognizing and acting on new opportunities and can respond to change in conditions from outside sources. While the capacity to make sound decisions among known alternatives is crucial, taking responsibility for change also depends on the discovery of ways to deal with challenges that are fundamentally uncertain. That suggests a need to explore ways that people can learn to take more active and productive roles—for themselves, their families, and their civic associations—in discovering ways to encourage innovation and enterprise in the places where they live.

We recognize that communities differ in those capacities. We also note that the emphasis on discovery requires a theory of citizen-driven political change that is explicitly based on learning.

At this point in our research we know more about the barriers to productive civic learning. John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, for example, have been remarkably eloquent in their studies of the miseducation that has resulted from the professionalization of challenges that were once seen as the purview of citizens and civic associations. They show how well-intentioned professional efforts can reinforce the underlying problem of struggling communities. People have been encouraged to define themselves and their communities by their needs and deficiencies rather than by their assets and capacities.

The impact on learning goes generally unrecognized because of the professional focus on instrumental problem solving. The long-run result has often been the antithesis of development. People learn to be clients of professional services and are left with a reduced sense of their capacity to act on shared concerns.

With the challenge of civic learning in view, Kettering's Economic Change workgroup has convened a joint-learning exchange with a group of organizations that support community-based initiators of experiments in public engagement. We called the project Citizens at Work: Engaging for Prosperous Communities. The working group includes representatives from the Institute for Community and Economic Development at Auburn University, the Esquel Group, the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, the Kettering Foundation, the Learning and Leadership Program at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga, the National Civic League, New Mexico First, the Southern Growth Policies Board, and the West Virginia Center for Civic Life. The group has convened at the Kettering Foundation for workshops, monthly conference calls, and through a project website that provides a forum and a hub for reports and related materials.

When we first met in late 2009, the group agreed to an interest in what could help initiators of civic engagement efforts more effectively align their endeavors with what is known about what makes public life work and develop. The interest resulted from a diagnosis that we all shared at least to some extent: that many so-called engagement efforts are not so aligned, and therefore—regardless of the instrumental outcomes—do not result in a greater capacity for public work in the future. Indeed we recognize that the growing professionalization of public engagement endeavors may be resulting in effects on learning that are similar to those identified by McKnight and Kretzmann. Are people learning that public engagement is something that needs to be professionally organized?

While the capacity to make sound decisions among known alternatives is crucial, taking responsibility for change also depends on the discovery of ways to deal with challenges that are fundamentally uncertain. That suggests a need to explore ways that people can learn to take more active and productive roles . . . in discovering ways to encourage innovation and enterprise in the places where they live.

Key Insights in Design of Efforts

1. **Citizens *must* be engaged if communities are to solve some of their most difficult problems.** Such problems have multiple causes and cannot be solved with a technical fix (unlike repairing streets and bridges). Effectively addressing these problems requires citizens to act—and keep on acting. So . . . ***engage citizens to address community problems.***
2. **Citizens often think about problems differently than institutions or professionals.** Not only do people feel more empowered when they are encouraged to identify and frame the issues related to a problem or opportunity, but they often uncover different solutions than institutions or professionals who are looking at the problem from the lens of their own particular expertise. So … ***recognize the limits of professional expertise.***
3. **People become engaged only around issues or problems that are of particular interest or concern to them.** It's not realistic to assume that all citizens will be engaged in all issues. The definition of *community* is therefore dynamic and ever-changing, with groups of people—who may or may not be connected by geographic borders—coming together to solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity. So . . . ***start with what people care about.***
4. **Citizen engagement—and governance—is a skill learned by practice.** It's important to create mechanisms that allow for sustained citizen engagement rather than just one-time events. As citizens gain experience and see that they can make a difference, they may be drawn into issues beyond their initial areas of interest—particularly as they begin to see how many community issues are interrelated. So . . . ***establish structures that sustain engagement.***
5. **It's often most effective to engage citizens within the organizations and networks they are already a part of; we don't have to start from scratch.** It's likely that they are already talking about a particular issue in these networks and may have the capacity and connections to implement solutions. So . . . ***engage existing networks.***
6. **Networks and connections between organizations can multiply the power of civic initiatives and make them truly communitywide, or public.** Yet, these connections typically don't happen by themselves—active intervention is often needed to connect groups that might, at first glance, seem to have very different interests. Even groups working on similar issues often have weak connections. Convenors can help communities redefine their relations, reshape their networks, and restructure their capacity to act. So . . . ***connect existing networks and stakeholders.***
7. **When a group of people comes together for a community conversation, there will be tensions between goals, ideas, and values.** What may at first seem to be tensions between groups may, with further examination, be seen as common values that everyone shares—such as a desire for freedom or for security—but which pull against each other. Tensions and conflicts do not have to be resolved as long as everyone shows respect for diverse positions. We can agree to disagree. It's important to recognize tensions from the beginning of a community conversation. So . . . ***recognize and value tensions.***

From, "Community Questions: Engaging Citizens to Address Community Concerns," by Joe Sumners and Linda Hoke, Kettering Foundation Citizens at Work project.

Our work began with a question: If an initiator (an individual, group, or coalition) of a civic effort intends to strengthen the capacity of people to act on shared civic concerns, what are the critical guiding insights for the initiator to have in mind in their design and ongoing evaluation of the effort? To put this in the language of education, we were identifying the "learning outcomes" to be elicited in the initiator, or "civic innovator," who comes to a center for public life for guidance in the design of an innovation.

With that in mind, we began with the challenge of identifying the critical insights. Together they provide an abstract conceptual lens for understanding public life, which highlight the key things to consider in the design of innovations in the engagement of people. One example of the layout of the diagnostic lens was produced by a collaboration of the Southern Growth Policies Board and the Auburn Institute. It is reproduced in the illustration at left.

The next step in our research exchange is to explore ways that the insights that make up this diagnostic lens can be elicited in a practical way in the minds of civic innovators. We have agreed that it will involve a diagnostic question-based interaction, with the details of the questions and the interaction depending on the context of the effort. However the generic insights—the learning outcomes outlined in the illustration—are presumed to be universally relevant. We think that some aspects of the questions and interactions that elicit them may be as well. If so, we may be able to share some practical general insights with other organizations that are trying to provide support for civic innovators but often find that the key insights are misunderstood, or so thinly grasped as to be not conducive to real political change. That is the promise of this research for Kettering.

For information about this ongoing project see the workgroup webpage at http://tinyurl.com/4246sov.

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