KETTERING REVIEW

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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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. . . afterthoughts

by David Mathews

The ability to make sense of what is happening to us, and then to determine how to act, is a social process of creating a shared sense of our world.

O ur most useful insights are often hidden even though they are in full view. We see them, yet we don't always recognize them. That has happened to the Kettering Foundation in a year's overview of our long history of studies of the public and public education. The relationship between the public and public education is an inescapable subject for a foundation concerned with how our democracy can work better, or, more specifically, how citizens can shape their future. Our insights from this research didn't become clear until we linked elements in our own thinking and saw not only connections, but also an emerging narrative, a story of the journey we have been on in our evolving research.

The direction we at Kettering have taken has been influenced primarily by what we have learned from the experiences of citizens, working in their communities, often with institutions. But going into all those details would make the journey itself difficult to follow, and it is the journey that we want to illuminate. To mark our trail, the *Review* has used familiar benchmarks, published authors whose work is more accessible than our interfoundation musings and reflections. The *Kettering Review* may be an ideal vehicle for drawing together many of these authors into a coherent and, we think, compelling story.

Obviously, the first books we read dealt with schools, which were the logical place to concentrate because they are the dominant institutions for the formal instruction of students. For decades the foundation has been studying the public schools, but eventually

we found it necessary to put schooling into the larger context of education. So without in any way turning away from the schools, we recognized that other institutions also mold the lives of young people. Our primary focus is always citizens, and we were struck by how often they separate schooling, which they consider to be the business of professionals, from education broadly defined. We also found it helpful to distinguish between the instruction of young people and the cultivation of the ability to learn, from and with others. Education is essentially the cultivation of learning. But where, then, does learning occur, other than in schools? That question led us to look at communities and how they influence what young people learn. This progression marked the first part of our journey.

There is a literature that marks this evolution in the foundation's thinking, and John Dewey's work is central because, early on, he pointed out that schools capture only a fraction of life. Yet the schools, he wrote, tend to isolate control of education, keeping educators apart from the freer and more flexible modes of social interaction. More recently, anthropologist Hervé Varenne has pointed out that schools deal with only some of the many types of knowledge, specializing in "literacy and numeracy"—which is academic language for reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Like Dewey, Kettering has seen cases in which the schools have become isolated from the public they were created to serve. We have also seen communities where the public has lost a sense of ownership and responsibility for these institutions. Citizens don't believe they have ownership because they can't influence what the schools do; control seems to

be in the hands of educational bureaucracies. So people don't believe the public schools are really *their* schools. And that is not only a problem for schools but also for democratic self-rule.

Later we became more aware of exactly who these other educating institutions are. Lawrence Cremin, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian (and a former Kettering trustee), was useful in identifying a variety of educating institutions in his three-volume study of American history. He showed that the country has always educated through families, along with churches, libraries, museums, benevolent societies, youth groups, agricultural fairs, radio and television stations, newspapers, and military organizations. We found a similar perspective on all that educates in the work of Varenne, who documented the pervasiveness of "education writ large," as Cremin would say.

As we continued on this journey, we also realized that communities have other educational resources that aren't confined to institutions like museums and libraries. People like Bob Cornett in Georgetown, Kentucky, reported discovering educational resources in such unlikely places as farms for retired racehorses. That discovery led us to identify scores of non-school educators who are using local resources to educate. Some are educating through community projects to reintroduce chestnut trees into Appalachia or to build a fish tank on the Gulf Coast. In this issue of the *Review*, Judith Green calls attention to opportunities for civic education in numerous nongovernmental organizations and coalitions located in our communities. The implications for democracy? People are regaining control through the things they make to prompt learning in youngsters—and those "things"

are usually in communities. The work of making things together fosters a concrete, tangible understanding of self-rule that can be a counter to the hollow, vacuous concept of democracy that troubles Wendy Brown.

The foundation had indeed moved a step forward in its thinking when we made a distinction between education as teaching and education as the promotion of learning. We were careful not to overdraw the contrast because good teaching aims to inspire learning. We distinguished between transferring information from generation to generation (one definition of instruction) and acquiring the ability to make sense of what is happening to us and then determining how to act. The latter is a social process of creating a shared sense of our world. People construct knowledge out of their experiences by assessing those experiences in terms of what they value.

In looking for a literature to mark this turn in our journey, we found a 2004 *Phi Delta Kappan* article by retired teacher and school administrator Marion Brady. He argues that the main task of education is "to help students make more sense of the world—themselves, and others." This was very much like what some citizens described as their objective in using community resources to educate. Brady's notion resonates with Bywater's argument for an education that fosters "moral imagination"—an intellect that sees the possibilities in life.

An obstacle to this kind of learning, however, remains a perhaps unintended yet dominating influence of what has been described as "technical rationality." Technical rationality privileges scientific or objective evidence over subjective human experience, which is essential in the social construction of knowledge, our making sense of the world. We had learned about the effects of this technical rationality when citizens and leaders talked about problems with "accountability standards" being used to judge the performance of schools and other institutions. The standards are based on measurable outcomes that are compatible with the way technical rationality defines knowledge. But the standards do not necessarily reflect what citizens want to know, nor are they consistent with what people think institutions need to do to be accountable. Furthermore, the standards don't recognize what citizens can do to educate; and they don't leave much room for citizen accountability.

This is another quite serious problem for a democracy, but despite this obstacle, we have continued to look for evidence of the kind of learning that Brady, Bywater, and others have found essential in preparing a new generation for the future. And we have found this learning going on in an array of educating institutions in communities where we had begun the second phase of our journey. We followed this logic: if a primary function of education is learning to learn, if there are resources throughout a community that can be used to foster learning, and if the schools alone shouldn't be held accountable, then who is responsible for preparing the next generation for the future? This brought us squarely to communities.

It was only a small—but conceptually enormous—step to move from seeing the educational resources in a community to seeing the community *itself* as an educator; that is, as an accountable political actor capable of bringing together all of its educating institutions, significantly strengthening the hand of the citizenry.

The impetus for this phase of our journey had come from a radical notion that communities are not simply locales full of resources that can be used to educate; they are, themselves, the primary educators, and the schools exist to support them—not the other way around! This idea turns the current school-community relationship on its head. It assumes that a community exists to do more than provide services and protect the physical well-being of residents. Communities also offer people opportunities to develop to their fullest potential. And that requires communities to educate.

Why is this notion so startling? Why don't communities regularly connect their educating institutions in a way that takes advantage of all the resources that could be used to promote learning? Some of the obstacles are obvious: institutions are typically organized like silos, each with a separate, specialized function. Institutions also tend to be organized bureaucratically for efficiency. Most formidable of all, people in communities often disagree considerably over matters of education. Nonetheless, the foundation has seen the potential in communities where, as one citizen put it, "everybody in town is trying to educate our kids."

Having come to see communities themselves as educators, we wanted to look more closely at what determines the way a community goes about educating. We got a clue about where to focus our attention from a report on neighborhoods in St. Paul, Minnesota, that were using local resources to educate. According to the authors, the ultimate purpose of the projects was to change the culture of learning in the community. Some cultures support academic

development much more than others; and what a culture supports has everything to do with what happens in schools and beyond.

A culture may say that everyone should be contributing to the education of our young people. Changing a culture, however, is a formidable task. Cultures are slow to form and difficult to change. So even though we are convinced that a culture that values learning is important, we aren't confident that we know how to get to the place where everyone would be educating the kids. One or two projects won't do the job. Cultural change takes persistent effort over many years. That's when we reread Donald Schön, Chris Argyris, Stewart Ranson, and others who have written about learning systems or practices that can be changed.

Change seems to require an unconventional attitude about success and failure. We have seen projects in communities that succeeded, but people soon quit working. Similarly with projects that failed, people became discouraged and quit. So whether a project is a success or a failure doesn't necessarily affect what happens next. High-achieving communities, on the other hand, are persistent; they take both in stride, and they learn from their mistakes. They know how to fail successfully.

Ways of learning can change if communities reevaluate their goals as they progress in the work. (Typically, goals or standards remain fixed, and progress is measured against them.) Systems can change if communities also assess or learn about themselves, not just about their projects. Making these changes would significantly alter the way a community goes about involving, if not everybody, a large number of people and organizations in the business of "educating the kids." Unless a community is learning itself as it tries to enrich the learning

of young people, the community is not likely to keep up the effort required to change its culture.

The journey that took us from schools to education writ large, and to learning, then on to communities and their cultures of learning, and finally to systems or ways of learning could be nothing more than a series of vignettes. But when the foundation put them all together, they fit into a coherent picture. And the story of the journey taken as a whole is a powerful story of how education and democracy are interrelated and interdependent. Of course, not everybody has traveled in the same direction we have or come out at the same place. And certainly we aren't the only ones to have taken this journey. Nonetheless . . .

Even though we aren't finished traveling, the view is clearer where we are now. There is more to the connection between democracy and education than is reflected in the platitude that schools serve democracy and therefore have a claim on public funds. That is true, but it isn't true enough. The platitude doesn't extend to all of public education; and it doesn't recognize the contributions of citizens, aside from funding. Nothing in it suggests that communities are educators accountable for how they educate, or that communities might make use of all their educational resources, particularly those as improbable as horse farms. Little encourages schools to find ways to ally themselves with other community educators or to recognize the barriers—legal and professional—that stand in their way when they do try to collaborate. That is why the journey isn't over. There are miles to go.

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