How Kettering Discovered Democracy

Recently, the National Civic League asked why the Kettering Foundation has done so much research on putting the public back into public education. Our answer, in brief, was that our understanding of democracy demanded it. The objective of our research is to help democracy work as it should. Of course, there are any number of valid definitions of democracy, and the foundation has never claimed it has the only correct one. Kettering’s definition is taken from the word itself. The demos refers to “the people,” as those in a village, and the cracy is from kratos, which means “supreme power.” Our understanding of democracy is that it is about citizens having the power to shape their future. The education of the next generation is an obvious way of doing that. So the connection between democracy and education is inescapable. This is why our concept of democracy compels us to look at education and at the influence that people have on it.

How did democracy become so central to what the foundation does and how it does it? The answer isn’t as obvious as it might seem; democracy didn’t appear in the foundation’s mission statement until 1996. Even though it was implied before then, it wasn’t explicit. Yet the focus on democracy has come to dictate not only what Kettering investigates but also how it goes about its research. We realized that, to be consistent, the foundation has to behave in ways that are compatible with the kind of democracy it studies.

This year, we’ve become more aware of how our understanding came about by sharing memories of key events in the foundation’s history, including the creation of Kettering’s three publications, Connections, the Kettering Review, and the Higher Education Exchange. Over the past 10 months, Kettering board members, program officers, former program officers, associates, and others have engaged in something like tribal history making. The foundation knows from its research that the stories people tell each other about their communities’ past can influence how the communities will behave going forward. Similarly, reflecting on Kettering’s history has implications for the research the foundation will do in the future. And as this tribal history making has moved beyond the program officers to include the people in the organizations we work with, we have found that the storytelling has had the added benefit of strengthening ties to the numerous networks related to the foundation’s research.

In this piece, I’ll focus on what we are learning from the history of Connections, which was launched in 1987. Of Kettering’s three annual periodicals, from the beginning, Connections has been addressed to the broadest audience. One objective has been to join readers in a two-way conversation with the foundation. We hoped they would not only relate to us but also to one another so
we all could share what we were doing and learning. Another objective was to show the connections between various Kettering research projects. We have long believed that the whole of our research is greater than the sum of the parts. And in the inaugural issue, I wrote that all of Kettering’s research was “interrelated.” But I didn’t explain how. I couldn’t. The projects were what a friendly critic called “a glorified collection of bits and pieces.” In 1987, these ranged from citizen diplomacy to government problem solving to public policymaking in science and education. Nothing was said about what, if anything, was common to all of these.

Connections’ history sheds light on how democracy became the unifying concept for all of our research. Initially, the foundation accepted the prevailing definition of democracy, which was, and still is, that democracy is representative government created by contested elections. From this perspective, citizens are either voters or consumers of government services. They are acted upon more than they act. This understanding would change dramatically as we looked at what citizens were actually doing and at other concepts of democracy in the scholarly literature.

The citizens who came to have a profound effect on the foundation’s understanding of democracy were visible in the first issue of Connections. Volume 1 showed a picture on the cover of Pat Henry reporting on what people had said in the National Issues Forums on Social Security reform. She was at the Ford Presidential Library with former Presidents Ford and Carter. But she was at the podium, and they were listening. Other articles were written by citizens or drew on the results of interviews with them. Mary McFarland, a teacher from St. Louis, wrote about an effort in social studies to emphasize the role of citizens as well as the function of governments. Shannon Reffett, supervisor of education at the Westville Correctional Center in Indiana, was interviewed about a project in prisons teaching inmates the skills needed to join in the work of citizens when they were released. Caesar McDowell reported on an initiative to engage citizens in a comprehensive program of educational reform that went beyond schools. There was also a picture of a meeting of the Kettering board of directors; they were “looking outward” toward the citizenry by including Denver attorney Gail Klapper in their discussion on how people were working in communities to solve common problems. Wherever Kettering looked, it saw citizens, and they were more than voters; they were primary actors trying to shape their future with others.

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As the first issue shows, one of the best opportunities the foundation had for seeing citizens doing the work of citizens came from an alliance between Kettering and the National Issues Forums. Over time, these forums would attract thousands of participants to their deliberations. Kettering used its research to prepare issue guides or briefing books for these forums. The issue guides emphasized the difficult trade-offs that have to be made on any political issue or community action project. This required people to do what was called “choice work” with others who often disagreed with them.
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Over time, the citizenry that the foundation sees has expanded to include people working to put the public back into education, those engaged in building a greater capacity for civic action in their communities, and people trying to forge a more productive relationship with both governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

Kettering would come to recognize that the work that citizens do redefined democracy for us. The way democracy works is through the work people do with other people. This work is more than paying taxes, obeying laws, and voting. Citizens are political actors joining forces to produce things that make life better for everyone.

I wish I could say that we recognized this immediately, but we didn’t. It took time, plus the influence of what we learned from combing through the ancient and modern texts on democracy. We found authors from Pericles to Jefferson who put citizens at the center of democracy. And their ideas illuminated what the citizens we were seeing were telling us; they helped give meaning to what we were observing. Eventually, the combination of ideas and citizen observations reshaped our understanding of democracy. Without a conceptual context, the citizens we were seeing would have appeared to be just nice people. And without seeing everyday citizens deciding and acting, the concepts may have been just abstracts without much practical meaning. We came to realize that democratic citizens are defined not just by their relationship to governments, but also by the work they do with one another. As Elinor Ostrom demonstrated in her Nobel Prize-winning research, this work is essential to the effectiveness of all of our representative institutions.

Seeing democracy as a system in which the people collectively generate the power to shape their future has given the foundation a unifying concept for all of its research. We began to look at everything from the perspective of citizens and the work they need to do in order for democracy to realize its full potential. What we learned by using this perspective has become a distinctive characteristic of the foundation’s research. The litmus tests for Kettering have been (1) whether the research would respond to citizens who feel pushed to the political sidelines and aren’t sure how to make a difference, (2) whether it would be useful to communities that can’t solve their most wicked problems without the work only citizens could do, and (3) whether it would help institutions that are losing the confidence of citizens even as they struggle to reengage them.

This citizen-centered view of democracy pointed the way to a host of new studies and significantly shaped the way the foundation goes about its research, particularly the way the foundation relates to the networks that have developed around major areas of research. In fact, the foundation’s understanding of democracy helped Kettering recognize the value of networks.

These networks include what is still the largest group, sponsors of NIF deliberations. But other networks—

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Key Events in KF History from 1927 to 2015

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<td>1927</td>
<td>June 24, 1927 – The Charles F. Kettering Foundation is incorporated as a not-for-profit organization. The purpose of the organization is stated as “the advancement of human knowledge and progress of science, art, and literature.” Original board members are Charles F. Kettering, Lee Warren James, and George Smith.</td>
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actually networks of networks—now extend to civic organizations like the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, along with professional associations, such as those for librarians (American Library Association) and lawyers (American Bar Association). And while Kettering is focused on the United States, the networks are enriched by organizations in other countries, like those in the Arab Network for the Study of Democracy and the Citizens’ Accord Forum in Israel.

Drawing on these networks, Connections publishes stories that explain the nature of the work citizens do. So far, Kettering has discovered a half dozen or so practices or ways of working that give people more control over their future. Even something seemingly of little consequence, like the names that problems are given—and who gets to name them—proved to be crucial. Naming problems in terms of the things citizens consider valuable rather than just using expert or political terms has everything to do with whether people will become involved in civic work. As recent Connections articles have shown, naming problems in terms of what people hold dear turns an ordinary routine of identifying issues into a democratic practice.

In saying that Kettering’s understanding of democracy has guided the foundation to new research, I don’t want to give the impression that the foundation can unilaterally decide what to study. That might be true if the studies were only diagnostic; but they aren’t. They are about solving problems, not just understanding them. So the foundation always has to find “fellow travelers,” organizations on the ground with a genuine interest in learning what the research might show them about their own work. The research has to be done collaboratively with them.

Democratic precepts dictate that it is better when studies are done with others, not just on them. For instance, because the way problems are named is crucial and citizens are turned off by technical or highly partisan descriptions, the foundation had to seek out those in the business of naming problems, such as journalists, to see whether any of them have an interest in collaborating. Would any news organization have a self-interest in research on more public-friendly names? Fortunately, we have found some of these journalists recently, and future Connections will include stories of what they are doing to rename problems in citizens’ terms.

We hope that the kind of collaborative research we are doing with journalists will also spark interest in other professions. That will create more connections in the networks. And it is the diversity of connections that is important to the research, not the size of the network.

For Kettering, the opportunities for collaboration are in networks of organizations that are interested in learning better ways to do their work. We all should learn from others, but no one can learn for someone else. In these networks, no one is dependent on others for answers; the relationships are based on a shared struggle to know more in order to be able to do more. As such, no one is at the center of these networks, like a hub of a wheel with all of the spokes attached. Communications flow in such a way that anybody can reach anybody else as directly as possible; that is, without having to go through someone else. The foundation calls the meetings with these organizations “learning exchanges.” Kettering “trades” what it has learned from past exchanges for accounts of what the organizations are doing in their work with citizens.

The challenge for the foundation is to avoid the many mistakes that block the learning exchanges and destroy networks. Foundations are hierarchical institutions by nature, and they may need to be. They aren’t democracies; they are companies, which are some people, but not all, gathered for some purposes, but not all. The problem is that what makes organizations effective can be antithetical to the well-being of networks. Kettering has become what the literature calls a “hybrid organization,” an organization attached to networks that the foundation doesn’t own and can’t direct.

The question for future Connections is how to be an instrument for a hybrid organization. After all, the title, Connections, is just another name for networking.

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