

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2018

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The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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A Note of Appreciation

David Brown has not just been an editor of *HEX* since 1994. He is also its cocreator, together with former Kettering Foundation program officer Deborah Witte. The *Higher Education Exchange*, as readers will know, is a publication whose purpose is to facilitate a conversation in higher education about the role of academe in democracy, particularly the role of students as actors and producers.

David was ideal as an editor of the journal because he brought to the work an astonishing breadth of experience, both inside and outside the academy: from serving as deputy mayor of New York City under Mayor Ed Koch to teaching at Yale's School of Management and New School's Milano Graduate School, and serving as president of Blackburn College. His perceptive insights were evident in the interviews he conducted, which were regularly published in *HEX*. And he undoubtedly drew on what he learned from the *Exchange* in his own books, including *The Real Change-Makers: Why Government is Not the Problem or the Solution* and *America's Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects*.

His most recent contribution to Kettering's work has been to help launch a new initiative in higher education to cultivate a greater civic and democratic understanding of professionalism. We are deeply appreciative of David's many contributions to this journal and to Kettering's research. We are pleased to have Derek Barker, who is leading Kettering's studies of democracy and higher education, continue on as coeditor of the journal. And we welcome Alex Lovit as coeditor; he is leading Kettering's research on teaching deliberative democracy through historic decisions.

David Mathews

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PUBLIC ACHIEVEMENT

The Work of Building Democratic Culture

Harry C. Boyte

Can a pedagogical approach to civic education—one in which the primary emphasis is cultural (developing young people’s civic identities, civic habits, and civic agency), rather than structural and institutional (increasing numbers of voters, improving standardized tests scores, or changing policies)—grow on a significant scale? What are the pitfalls? A grassroots democratic initiative faces continuing strategic choices and trade-offs between institutional efficiency and growing to scale on the one hand and civic energy and commitment to its defining qualities on the other. A democratic cultural movement must grow in a democratic fashion. From its beginning, Public Achievement (PA), the youth civic-education and empowerment initiative I founded in 1990 in St. Paul, Minnesota, has struggled with such questions. What lessons might be drawn from the Public Achievement experiences for democracy-building efforts generally?

The aim of PA is to cultivate the empowering grassroots capacities, confidence, and public identification of “citizen” as the foundational agents of democracy that I had seen and experienced in the civil rights movement while working for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized by Martin Luther King Jr. Public Achievement has spread to communities across the United States and more than 20 countries, from Northern Ireland and South Africa to Poland and Japan, and its offshoots have taken many other forms. Public

Achievement has features of both a network and a philosophy of citizen-centered democracy—democracy as a culture

A democratic cultural movement must grow in a democratic fashion.

infused with habits and practices. This differs from the predominant civic-education focus on knowledge (that is, emphasis on government) and skills (mobilizing the troops). Most broadly, it challenges the idea of democracy as an institutional system of government and elections. It puts citizens at the center as civic producers, not simply volunteers or voters or consumers of government services and solutions.

Public Achievement is based on a framework called *public work*. Young people, usually between the ages of 8 and 18—sometimes now including college students—work as teams on issues they choose that make a public contribution, undertaken in a nonviolent and legal fashion. In PA, young people tackle issues ranging from bullying, racism, gang violence, drugs,

Public Achievement has features of both a network and a philosophy of citizen-centered democracy—democracy as a culture infused with habits and practices.

and sexual harassment to playground improvements, curricular changes, and better school lunches. Teams are coached by adults—often college students—who help them develop public strengths and talents—what we call

civic agency. They use political concepts that challenge conventional views. For instance, young people are described as citizens who are “cocreators” of schools and communities, not citizens-in-waiting for the opportunity to vote. Politics is about creating a world of shared resources, not simply fighting over scarce resources. This brings into view a generative understanding of power as “power to,” not simply “power over” others’ actions. The following chart compares civic action in different frameworks of civic education.

Frameworks of civic education	Civics	Service	Public work
What is democracy?	Free elections	Civil society and elections	Way of life built through deliberative public work
Citizen	Voter	Volunteer	Cocreator/civic producer
Citizenship	Voting	Community involvement	Public work (including professional work)
Politics	Struggle over scarce resources: who gets what?	Search for harmony	Engagement across differences on public tasks
Power	Power over	Power with	Power to
Learning focus	What happens in government	Responsibility	Civic agency, habits of mind and action

The frameworks of civics and service are not wrong, but the public-work frame expands people's sense of who they are and what it means to live in a democracy. It also highlights the civic potential and roles of teachers, support staff, and school leaders to promote and sustain youth civic empowerment through their work to become "citizen teachers," "citizen staff," and "citizen administrators." The difference between PA as a set of skills and PA as a philosophy of democracy creates tension and opportunities.

Citizens as Civic Producers

Public Achievement teaches skills of public problem solving and public creation that generate new ways of looking at politics, citizenship, power, and democracy. An iconic story of Public Achievement, told around the world, is about teams of fifth, sixth, and seventh graders at St. Bernard's Elementary School in St. Paul, the first significant home of Public Achievement. They worked for five years to build a playground in a neighborhood where adults had thought it would be too dangerous.

One morning in the autumn of 1998, just as snow began to fall, the lot donated for a playground by Saint Bernard's Catholic Parish filled with children, teachers, neighbors, college students, and a few professors and staff from the University of Minnesota. Some adults helped children put together swing sets. Others dug sand pits. Women from the church served refreshments. At the end of the day, all dedicated the playground with a plaque etched with drawings of cat feet that read, "PAWS: Public Achievement Works." The incoming governor, Jesse Ventura, visited the new playground on February 26, and in his State of the State address the following week, recognized five team members with the Governor's Award for a Better Minnesota for "reforming Minnesota every day through their good works." Joe Lynch, an eighth grader at Saint Bernard's who accepted the award for the group, was portrayed in Ventura's flamboyant style as a "citizen hero prevailing against all odds."¹

Years later, Joe's sister Alaina Lynch, who also worked on the playground, remembered the overall lesson. "It was a 'no-brainer' to have a playground for kids instead of an old lot, but that didn't mean that making it happen was straightforward," Alaina explained. She learned about city politics. "Public Achievement opened my eyes to the processes of government—petitions, connecting with the city council, commenting, obtaining permits. [These were] not things I would have thought about as a ten- or eleven-year-old otherwise." She also learned about neighborhood politics. "I learned there

are multiple sides to every idea. Even something that seemed straightforward to me could have negative ramifications from another point of view.” For her, the gang issue was “not a huge concern. The neighborhood gangs would hang out in the empty lot.” But others saw it differently. “We had to demonstrate that we had a plan for mitigating any risk—a fence, with the playground closed after certain hours.” She learned about different perspectives and compromise.²

The teams got the parish council on their side. They negotiated zoning changes with city officials. They raised more than \$60,000 from local businesses in the North End Business Association and other groups. To accomplish these tasks, the children learned how to interview people, write letters, give speeches, and call people they didn’t know on the phone. They worked to understand the views of adults they originally thought were opponents. They mapped power, did research, and negotiated. Throughout, they had a sense that their efforts were public work, as suggested in the name young people chose for the park: Public Achievement Works. They also learned political concepts—power, interests, and politics itself. “For most of my life, I’ve wanted to get involved with politics,” said Jeremy Carr, a pioneer of Public Achievement. “When [Public Achievement] came around and I found I could do the stuff I wanted to change—and got adults to treat me seriously—I got excited.” This was also the opportunity the principal, Dennis Donovan, was looking for. “We wanted kids doing citizenship-type things,” he said, “more than just reading to other little kids.”³

Public Achievement’s concepts differ from conventional ideas. Power is not simply “power over” but “power to”—the capacity to act with others of different views and interests to shape the world around us. “I got a lot of empowerment from Public Achievement,” said Tamisha Anderson 20 years later. Tamisha, an African American student at Saint Bernard’s, worked on the playground and on a team trying to change dress-code rules in the school. “We didn’t get white shoes, but we got the uniforms changed. It was empowering to know that your voice matters regardless of what color or size or age you are.” The lessons stayed with her. “I use [the example of] ‘the little train that could’ to this day with kids I talk to. I push them to stay involved even though they get knocked down.”⁴

Participants also learn and practice politics that confounds partisanship. Zach Baumann, of German American background, worked for several years on the playground. “We had neighborhood meetings. We worked with the city to get the zoning changed and interacted with local business leaders to

try to get some money. We met with the county commissioners.” Zach said he learned to be accountable, “a huge deal for people that age. You were letting down your team if you dropped the ball. We knew we had to rely on each other to get things done.” He learned to work across differences:

Civic involvement has a stereotypically liberal quality in a lot of the media, but it’s about conservative values, taking responsibility for what’s going on, contributing how you can to improve your world, not about asking somebody to do something for you.

There were kids of different views. “I didn’t care what someone else’s thoughts on immigration were,” Zack said.

We were trying to get the playground. That’s one of the biggest things Public Achievement can bring, the ability to put aside your differences for a common goal. You don’t have to like the person to work with them. Standing up and walking out of the room isn’t going to accomplish anything.⁵

In St. Bernard’s, the practices of Public Achievement became part of a broad cultural change in which teachers, support staff, and involved parents also developed new ways of working together and thinking about the world, and themselves in the world.

Challenges of Expansion

In one sense, PA involves a relatively simple “model,” translating core skills from community organizing into an action-oriented approach to civic education for young people. The model has parallels with other groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous, which have network qualities, rather than centralized organizations. Like AA,

Public Achievement has programmatic elements (in PA’s case, teams, issue selection by participants, coaches). But Public Achievement is not

Our organizing team faced a series of key decision points. We opted for decentralization . . . to support local work.

implemented in a standardized way, nor does it have a predetermined goal like an ideology or test scores. Participants liken it to jazz, rather than a set piece of music. Like jazz, it takes shape in particular places and is open-ended, with continuing improvisations.

Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom’s book *The Starfish and the Spider* describes networks like AA as decentralized, “no-one-in-charge” organizations. “Each AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] circle knows about the needs of its members

and each group can decide how to react accordingly,”⁶ they write. Key decision points in Public Achievement’s history were pivotal for sustaining these network features, but the motivation for sustaining them grew from the concepts, as well as practical effectiveness.

In the late 1990s, when Public Achievement was spreading to Missouri and Wisconsin, our organizing team faced a series of key decision points. We debated whether to copyright the curriculum and franchise PA, whether to raise money for new regions, and whether to supervise the local network coordina-

We made another key decision, to retain the improvisational, jazz-like qualities rather than to shape PA as a program that could be simply implemented.

tors in Kansas City and Milwaukee. While continuing a coaching and connecting role out of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, we opted for decentralization, with free access to materials, local

control, and local fundraising to support local work. There were downsides to such decisions, including less dependable revenue and diminished chances for rapid expansion. National fundraising supported an infrastructure of communications, training in the craft of public work, and periodic gatherings. Such funding was also increasingly precarious in the “No Child Left Behind” environment of education, with the relentless focus on standardized testing.

In March 2001, several of Public Achievement’s major funders hosted a roundtable in Kansas City with ten community foundations from across the country that work from a “donor services” model, meaning they identify donors who might support an initiative and connect them to projects reflecting their interests. The aim of the consortium was to explore possibilities for national expansion. The community foundation representatives listened to a remarkable panel of PA participants—children, coaches, and teachers—describe their work. Public Achievement did not fit the logic model traditionally used in funding, a linear account of how particular inputs produce predictable outputs. We made another key decision, to retain the improvisational, jazz-like qualities rather than to shape PA as a program that could be simply implemented.⁷

There is abundant evidence that Public Achievement develops civic and political capacities. For instance, RMC Research Corporation, a leading evaluation group, did a two-year evaluation of Public Achievement in 2005 and 2006, supported by the Carnegie Corporation. The evaluators used qualitative and quantitative methods, and found many positive impacts:

Participation in Public Achievement gave students wider perspectives on the world and better skills in working with others. It gave the students better ways to justify their opinions with evidence and helped them to work better with others by listening to differing opinions, balancing their needs with those of others to complete projects, and see how their actions impacted others in their communities.⁸

The obvious success of such skills in PA resulted in many adaptations, somewhat like AA evolved into many self-help groups. For instance, the model was used to create “Public Adventures,” the civic-education curriculum of 4-H that involves hundreds of thousands of children. It was the basis of the AmeriCorps curriculum during the Clinton years. It was also the original model for “Action Civics” by groups like Mikva Challenge and Earth Force. The Obama Foundation uses Action Civics in its youth organizing. Meira Levinson, a philosopher and professor of education at Harvard, identifies it as “the gold standard” of civic education in *No Citizen Left Behind*.⁹ But one feature we noticed early on was the disappearance of the unconventional core concepts of Public Achievement about politics, democracy, and citizenship in these adaptations.

Democracy as a Way of Life

The jazz-like qualities of Public Achievement are grounded in what are called “free spaces,” where participants make choices, interact across differences, and develop political skills and habits. Free spaces are face-to-face settings where people have room to self-organize, discuss ideas, and learn relational skills. They create the unpredictable, open-ended quality of Public Achievement and its adaptations. Sara Evans and I developed the concept of free spaces to name our experiences in the 1960s freedom movement. The movement was full of free spaces, from black churches and schools to beauty parlors and other businesses and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. What generated their freedom was relative autonomy from the values and power dynamics of segregated white society. Their democratic qualities came from their public cultures, involving interplay of a diversity of views and interests.

Public Achievement cultivates new ways of thinking about young people’s identity and role in the world. This process requires attention to learning cultures, not simply individual learning—a motivation to resist turning PA into an easily implemented program. The pedagogy is challenging because sustained engagement with concepts and purposes goes against the grain of what Xolela Mangcu, a South African colleague, has called the “technocratic

creep” of the modern world. Schools, for instance, focus on technical skills and information transfer. They leave largely unexamined questions of purpose or the deep examination of the meaning of concepts like power, citizenship, politics, and democracy itself.

Public Achievement has drawn on alternative traditions of education and understandings of citizenship. Scandinavian folk schools, for instance, emphasized attention to “education for life,” the purposes of every kind of work, and involved an older sense of citizenship with roots before the rise of modern states. Folk-school approaches inspired Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which birthed the citizenship schools of the civil rights movement. I organized citizenship schools after the initiative moved to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The Jane Addams tradition of Hull House settlement had similarities. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, John Dewey theorized about the vibrant learning culture of Hull House, full of different ideas, cultures, work experiences, and discussions. In his view, such democratic cultures depended on “habits”—not blind repetitions but learned patterns that create predispositions for action in unexpected circumstances. They can be changed and developed through intentional action. Deborah Meier, a great K-12 democracy educator, founded highly successful democracy-oriented public schools in East Harlem, New York, and Boston based on cultivating “five habits of mind.” Her schools’ cultures are also strongly connected to parents and community networks. They are characterized by endless public discussion, emphasis on education as work, and de-emphasis of standardized testing.

Public Achievement cultivates habits of action as well as of mind. In Mankato, Minnesota, Joe Kunkel, a political science professor at Mankato State University, developed a Public Achievement partnership with the Dakota Meadows local school and assigned his college students an essay reflecting on their experience with Public Achievement. He asked what the teams learned about “democracy, citizenship, politics, and working in groups.” A few quotes illustrate their reflections: “Coming into PA, I thought that citizenship meant to live in the United States and that politics was something only politicians were involved in,” said one. “As the year went on, I could not believe how big a role politics played even in a middle school.” Kunkel’s papers show the latent political and civic energies of young people. “I am amazed by what I have learned,” one student noted. “Not only did I learn to be an effective coach, I also learned about what it means to be an active citizen. We as coaches are renewing democracy for future generations. It has become clear to me through this course that the concept of democracy in America has lost much

of its luster and it must be restored.” Another explained, “No longer do I just sit back and let this crazy democracy machine roll by. If we do not like something, we can take steps to make the situation better.”¹⁰

Marie Ström, director of the democracy education efforts for the Institute for Democracy in South Africa for many years, adapted the Public Achievement model for public work in Africa. During that time, she witnessed shifts in how people understood themselves, each other, and democracy. In Burundi, where public-work education was taken to villages, the adult educators with whom she worked spoke about the dramatic impact. Emmanuel Manwangu commented:

I was afraid that people at the village level might get lost in the training, but even if it was a little challenging for them at the beginning, their minds were awakened and they very quickly came up to speed. Democracy started to become *concrete* for them—the power to take action on issues right where they live.

Eusébie Nzorijana described a dramatic relocation of “politics” that decentered the concept and the practice: “At the beginning, some participants were uneasy about conducting interviews. ‘This is politics,’ they said. Later a participant said proudly, ‘I can do politics myself now!’” Trainers reported remarkable changes in themselves, as well. Julienne Mukankusi said, “I had done research and training on democracy before this, but I had not lived it. Now I have seen that a skilled citizen has more power than one can imagine.” Manwangu described shifts in the meanings of democracy and citizenship: “This course changes one’s understanding of democracy itself. Our language has changed. Citizens are at the center.”¹¹

The concept of public work emerged as the Center for Democracy and Citizenship sought to translate community-organizing practices into efforts to make larger civic change. A group of institutions, including St. Bernard’s, the College of St. Catherine, Minnesota Cooperative Extension, and Augustana Nursing Home, wanted to revitalize the civic *identities* of their institutions, rather than simply undertaking civic-engagement activities. It soon became clear that institutional civic identity requires changes in culture, with relationship building going against the grain of professional cultures based on information and activities. Maria Avila, a colleague in Public Achievement who pioneered bringing relational organizing practices into higher education, explained that it involves “building something based on people who [are] clear about their interests and passions, the things that matter to them deeply and enough to sustain their involvement over time,” which is different from

the “predominate culture of wanting quick, concrete, predictable results and . . . [that] undervalues process and relationality.”¹²

Others have seen the challenge similarly. As Isak Tranvik puts it, Vaclav Havel, a leader of the Czech freedom movement, drew on traditions of “honest and responsible work in widely different areas of life,” akin to public work.

A citizen-centered view emphasizes the constitution of a democratic people.

In Havel’s view, political institutions or ideology could not create a good society. “Life is something unfathomable, ever-changing, mysterious and

every attempt to confine it within an artificial, abstract structure inevitably ends up homogenizing, regimenting, standardizing, and destroying life,” Havel said.¹³

It is important to recognize the obstacles to such perspectives in a world where state-centered theories of democracy and citizenship, defined by relations to the formal political community, are overwhelmingly dominant, shaping the views even of those who take up exclusion of “noncitizens.” As the Swedish theorist Jonna Pettersson has observed:

The fields of critical human rights theory and cosmopolitan and multicultural citizenship theory [reproduce] the criteria for political subjectification [as] inclusion in the [formal political] community, leaving the political subject without any emancipatory power of its own.¹⁴

Hannah Arendt, reflecting on the American Revolution, similarly saw the shift to representative government as the triumph of a state-centered view of democracy:

Paradoxical as it may sound, it was in fact under the impact of the Revolution that the revolutionary spirit in America began to wither away, and it was the Constitution itself, this greatest achievement of the American people, which eventually cheated them of their proudest possession.¹⁵

A state-centered view emphasizes the constitution of the government as the fundamental question. A citizen-centered view emphasizes the constitution of a democratic people. In 1939, John Dewey issued a challenge in this vein to those who believed that democracy rests on formal institutions. Beware, he said, of the “belief that [totalitarian] states rest only upon unmitigated coercion and intimidation.” As Melvin Rogers puts it:

For Dewey, democracy’s survival depends on a set of habits and dispositions—in short, a culture—to sustain it. Checks and balances do not have

an agency of their own. A democracy is only as strong as the men and women who inhabit it.¹⁶

Democracy's future requires strong citizens. It will take many ways for them to develop.



NOTES

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- ³ James Walsh, "Young Movers and Shakers," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, September 17, 1993 (in possession of author).
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- ⁷ Notes from Center for Democracy and Citizenship, *Midterm Report to the Kauffman Foundation on National Expansion*, 2002 (in possession of author).
- ⁸ RMC Research Corporation, *Public Achievement 2005–2006 Evaluation Brief*, <https://www.colorado.edu/publicachievement/sites/default/files/attached-files/evaluation.pdf> (accessed August 16, 2018).
- ⁹ Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 224.
- ¹⁰ Mankato Public Achievement website, 2002.
- ¹¹ Harry Boyte, Marie Ström, and Tami More, Chapter Four, "Public Work Abroad," in Harry Boyte, *Awakening Democracy through Public Work* (forthcoming from Vanderbilt University Press).
- ¹² Maria Avila, *Transformative Civic Engagement through Community Organizing* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2017), 43, 53.
- ¹³ Isak Tranvik, "An Existential Revolution: Havel on Democracy, Citizenship, and the Source of Popular Politics" (Dissertation in political theory, Duke University, in progress).
- ¹⁴ Jonna Pettersson, "Rethinking Political Subjectification: Equality Beyond a Community of Sameness," *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 3 (2011): 264.
- ¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 239.
- ¹⁶ Melvin Rogers, "Democracy Is a Habit: Practice It," *Boston Review* (July 28, 2018), <http://bostonreview.net/politics/melvin-rogers-democracy-habit-practice-it> (accessed August 16, 2018).

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