

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2020

An Experiment Studying Experiments

By David Mathews p. 2

From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums

By Jean Johnson and Keith Melville p. 35

COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement

By Michele Archie p. 55



The Work of
DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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

© Copyright 2020 by the Kettering Foundation
ISSN 2470-8003

Executive Editor
Melinda Gilmore

Editor
Brad Rourke

Copy Editors
Laura Carlson
Ellen Dawson-Witt

Design and Production
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.



CONTENTS

- 2 **An Experiment Studying Experiments**
David Mathews
- 15 **Leaderful Communities: Exploring Citizen-Leaders**
James (Ike) Adams and Erin Payseur Oeth
- 21 **Historic Decisions: Looking Deliberatively at the Past**
Joni Doherty
- 29 **The Issue Guide as a Pedagogical Tool**
Samantha Fried
- 35 **From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums**
Jean Johnson and Keith Melville
- 42 **The Library as Community Hub**
Marie Pyko, Lissa Staley, and Debbie Stanton
- 49 **Faith and Democracy**
Elizabeth Gish and Ekaterina Lukianova
- 55 **COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement**
Michele Archie
- 62 **In It Together: Opening American Education**
Damien Conners
- 67 **Deliberation in Everyday Conversation**
Wendy Willis
- 73 **Deliberative Democracy Institute 2020: An Opportunity to Innovate and to Reinvigorate Networking**
Maxine S. Thomas
- 79 **With the People: Connecting Campuses and Communities across the Country**
Betty Knighton and Kara Lindaman
- 85 **The Citizen Workers of Democracy**
Harry C. Boyte

Deliberation in Everyday Conversation

By Wendy Willis



The average American adult makes 35,000 decisions each day. Most of them are small and affect only the decision-maker—*What socks should I wear? Should I walk or take the bus? Should I put half-and-half or skim milk in my coffee?* But a significant subset of those decisions affect other people. And yet another subset of decisions must be made *with* other people, in families and workplaces, in churches and synagogues, and in communities, states, and nations. This spring, the Kettering Foundation brought together a group of long-time partners and associates for a half-day learning exchange about the role of deliberation in everyday life and in everyday conversations. This exchange was a follow-up to earlier Kettering research that examined how the practices nurtured in formal deliberative settings

might enhance the quality of day-to-day conversations.

This spring’s learning exchange sought to continue that work by “flipping the script” to ask whether deliberation shows up in everyday life and—if so—what it looks and feels like. The exchange also sought to explore how deliberation in everyday life might be similar to or different from deliberation in more formal settings such as those forums using National Issues Forums materials and how everyday deliberative practices might benefit the quality of deliberation in those more formal settings.

THE ANSWER IS YES

Kettering program officer Nick Felts opened the day by asking the simple question, “Do you think there is deliberation in everyday conversation?” The response was unanimous:



Citizens are deliberating all the time—in families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and nonprofits.

yes. Citizens are deliberating all the time—in families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and nonprofits. Betty Knighton, from the National Issues Forums Institute, suggested that everyday deliberation is easy to recognize because it is marked by the need to make a decision. As she put it, people need to make decisions, and they need to talk about those decisions. Not every decision—or even every conversation—is deliberative, but there is a tremendous amount of deliberation happening all around us.

DELIBERATIVE LABORATORY

We are living in a particularly deliberative moment. As the world faces the rapidly changing circumstances brought about by COVID-19, individuals, families, communities, and organizations must decide how to respond. And because the nature of the disease is communal, the

response is also necessarily so. Mark Wilson, of Auburn University, noted that while governments set a baseline for closing and then reopening institutions, those high-level decisions are only the beginning. Institutions and organizations must engage with trade-offs between health and economics, between safety and freedom, and between individual desires and communal responsibilities to make the day-to-day decisions brought on by COVID.

Derrick Hammond, from the Oak Ridge (Tennessee) City Council and Oak Valley Baptist Church, told the story of an inter-church deliberation about how best to feed hungry community members. The regular soup kitchens had to be closed, leaving many citizens without regular access to food. Representatives of the local churches discussed how to feed people without further spreading the virus and decided collectively to host drive-through pizza parties.

URGENCY AND EFFICACY

The group also observed that everyday deliberation has a sense of urgency and efficacy that is often missing from formal deliberative forums. Because day-to-day deliberation typically arises out of the need to make a decision, it often carries a real-world urgency with it. Deliberation in a forum, on the other hand, often has

a more theoretical feel; the questions at issue are important but removed from the decisions citizens make in their homes and communities.

As a result, even efforts to replicate the trade-offs that decision-makers face can feel more like a simulation than a real-life dilemma that requires citizens to roll up their sleeves.

The other factor that often drives everyday deliberation is personal efficacy. In other words, citizens usually deliberate about questions that they have the power—at least in part—to solve. As Patricia Harbour, of Center for Quality Education, characterized it: when citizens are deliberating about something in their day-to-day lives, they bring their resources and they take action. This focus on efficacy differs from the experiences that citizens have in many deliberative

forums, where it often feels as though there is a gap between the deliberation and decision-makers.

DELIBERATION IS NOT A STRAIGHT LINE

Several people noted that it is sometimes harder to catch deliberation “in the wild” because it is often intertwined with other conversations. Of course, not every ordinary decision requires deliberation, and even those decisions that could benefit from deliberation do not necessarily get a full airing. But ordinary speech often meanders in and out of deliberation. Conversations follow their own paths, some parts of them deliberative and some parts of them not. Also, friends and acquaintances are more likely to pick up and put down deliberative conversations over time.



As a result, the wisps of deliberation that blow through everyday conversation will sometimes be harder to detect than the crisp trade-offs that show up in formal deliberative forums.

The group also noted that the boundary between formal deliberation and informal conversation is often a porous one. Cristin Brawner, of the David Mathews Center for Civic Life, described an instance in which she and her colleagues hosted a formal public forum for “What’s Next, Alabama?” The next morning, they walked into the local coffee shop where they found a group of older men continuing the previous night’s conversation in somewhat louder and more colorful terms.

THE STORY IS THE THING

Another distinct characteristic of everyday speech is storytelling. Day-to-day conversation is full of personal stories. While a broader point can often be extrapolated from a story, that extrapolation is often not the reason for telling the story. The story has its own arc and its own emotional satisfaction for both the teller and the listener. As Knighton put it, in everyday conversations, “the story is the thing.”

That is not to say that stories don’t play a role in formal deliberative forums. They do. But because

rationality and linear argumentation are valued in formal forums, stories are often offered to dramatize an argument rather than as narrative events in and of themselves. That clipped version of storytelling may not meet the emotional needs of the participants. As Brawner put it, sometimes people just need to share their stories, even in formal forums, and it is important to let that happen before deliberation begins, especially if the stories are rooted in trauma or struggle.

EMOTION AND EXPRESSIVENESS

There was consensus among the group that everyday deliberative speech is marked by emotion and expressiveness. Knighton noted that forum participants in formal settings often feel that they are “supposed to” be guided by reason and logic, while in their everyday lives, their conversations are filled with anger and surprise and frustration and joy. As Derrick Hammond put it, in an everyday conversation, the rules and expectations are intuitive, or at least implicit, and there is a more natural and fuller flow between the participants. As he described it, there is an “organic dynamic to true deliberative conversations.”

Of course, this distinction is not universal. As Pat Harbour pointed

out, the subject matter of a public forum might well hit an emotional chord with all or some of the participants. As she noted, though the structure of the forums makes it less likely for discussions to get heated, sometimes the topic will produce heat in and of itself. In her experience, issues that touch on education and youth are likely to “generate fire.”

Participants in formal deliberative environments do often express anger, particularly anger directed at government or public officials. Even so, the emotional range of formal public deliberations is narrow compared with the emotional range of ordinary conversation, in which participants are more likely to express joy or confusion or grief in addition to anger and frustration.

THE VALUE OF FORUMS

With all that said, it would be easy to romanticize the deliberativeness of everyday speech and conclude that forums should mimic day-to-day life as much as possible. But the participants in this learning exchange did not come to that conclusion. Rather, they reaffirmed several very important and valuable aspects of formal deliberative forums.

First, several participants noted that in the same way that borrowing characteristics of everyday conversations could help make forums

feel more authentic and urgent, the intentionality of a well-designed forum can also improve the quality of everyday conversations. Wilson noted that everyday conversations are “enlivened” by the practices people learn in deliberative forums.

Second, Knighton noted that it is actually very unusual to have a deliberative conversation with true strangers and that well-designed deliberative forums are some of the few places that happens.

Finally, there was the suggestion that deliberation among strangers can be quite liberating. While citi-



In the same way that borrowing characteristics of everyday conversations could help make forums feel more authentic and urgent, the intentionality of a well-designed forum can also improve the quality of everyday conversations.

zens might be more emotionally free with friends and family members, they also might be more reluctant to disagree with people they know well because of potential risks to the relationships. Formal, moderated environments can sometimes help people be more willing to air potential disagreements.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Though there was a fair amount of agreement among the participants, a number of questions for future exploration were identified:

- What is the role of information and expertise in everyday deliberation? Where does that information come from? How are people using it?
 - How are emotion and urgency playing out in everyday deliberation?
 - Are there cultural or demographic drivers that affect deliberation in everyday conversation? If so, how do they affect both the likelihood and the form of deliberation?
 - What topics tend to generate deliberation in everyday life? What topics do not?
 - Has the nationalization of news and politics affected deliberation in everyday life? Are there issues that citizens do not regularly consider or deliberate?
- How can we learn more about the connection between deliberation and decision-making in everyday settings in order to make formal deliberative forums more connected to actual decision-making?

CONCLUSION

It is clear that deliberation happens regularly—daily—in ordinary conversations among citizens in a wide variety of settings. Deliberation is often marked by urgency, efficacy, storytelling, and emotion. It is often intertwined with all sorts of other types of speech, and conversations often weave in and out of deliberation. Everyday deliberative conversations are often guided by intuition and unspoken ground rules.

That is not to suggest, however, that formal deliberative forums should be abandoned. In fact, forums play an important role in providing space for citizens to express disagreement, and they provide an essential training ground for practices that extend into citizens' everyday lives. It is a virtuous cycle. The learning flows both ways—from everyday conversations to formal deliberations and back again. ■

Wendy Willis is a writer, a lawyer, the executive director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and the founder and director of Oregon's Kitchen Table, a program of the National Policy Consensus Center in the Mark O. Hatfield School of Government at Portland State University. She can be reached at wwillis@pdx.edu.



200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459; (937) 434-7300
444 North Capitol Street NW, Suite 434, Washington, DC 20001; (202) 393-4478
www.kettering.org

Kettering Foundation
200 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459