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.
in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the *Higher Education Exchange*, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, LWVWUXVWHHVRURIÀFHUV.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deborah Witte</td>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Boyte</td>
<td>Higher Education and the American Commonwealth Partnership: An Interview</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire Snyder-Hall</td>
<td>Tales from Anti-Civic U</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Minnich</td>
<td>Educating Democratically: An Interview</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Wilson and Nan Fairley</td>
<td>Living Democracy: A Project for Students and Citizens</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen M. Knutson and Dan A. Lewis</td>
<td>Civic Engagement and Doctoral Education</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin Hoecker</td>
<td>Public Scholarship at the Graduate Student Level</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wynne Wright</td>
<td>Wicked Bedfellows: Can Science and Democracy Coexist in the Land Grant?</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Hudson</td>
<td>What Is College For? The Public Purpose of Higher Education</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edited by Ellen Condliffe Lagemann and Harry Lewis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Mathews</td>
<td>Higher Education and Har Megiddo</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, spoke with Elizabeth Minnich, currently Senior Scholar, Association of American Colleges & Universities and former chair, Committee on Public Philosophy, American Philosophical Association. Brown was interested in learning more about what conceptual changes she thinks are needed for educating democratically.

**Brown:** There is a great deal of criticism these days that institutions of higher education pay too little attention to what you would call “active democratic education.”

**Minnich:** From whom? I’m not at all sure such criticism is coming from a broad public, much as I might wish it were. I don’t hear it from elected officials either. What we are bombarded with is criticism that colleges and universities are not contributing to economic “global competitiveness,” or delivering the exact “product” a “consumer” of education intended to be buying. Students are also rightly organizing about the monster problem of indebtedness. Neither they nor their parents are looking around for schools where they will prepare to be active in public life.

The passion for democratic education that actively as well as reflectively engages learning with responsible practice comes, in my experience, mostly from some faculty and students, and, increasingly, administrators. It is hardly irrelevant that it also comes from funders. The Department of Education in D.C. is now involved too, and that’s great. If there is criticism specifically about our shortcomings as educators in and for democracy, it is from those sources; they want it done more widely, deeply, and faster.

I actually think the academy should be admired and more actively supported in sustaining today, in the face of severe budgetary attacks, the many ways it has changed since it was almost exclusively for an elite few who could expect public influence as an entitlement of their class, their race, their gender.

**Brown:** Where, then, do you find the academy’s attention misplaced or contrary to “active democratic education”?
Minnich: Although specialization is perfectly appropriate to universities, it creates difficulties for its crucial counterpart, general education, and for some interdisciplinary and engaged civic education work. It does so simply because, while it is fine to evaluate specialized scholarship by standards honed for it through generations, it is ludicrous to apply those same standards to, say, action research undertaken with a community to find solutions to pressing problems defined by that community. Higher education still does judge disciplinary expert knowledge more effectively, on the whole, than it does teaching, and judges both a great deal more effectively than it does action. Furthermore, since academic judgment tends to founder when it encounters collaborative, and/or cross-disciplinary academic research (there are exceptions, as in science), there are indeed problems of evaluation, of judgment, inherited from times when disciplinary specialization was the standard-setting apex of academe. Thus, I hear from untenured and (the increasing number of) nontenure-track faculty as from students that they are concerned about being appropriately evaluated for work outside disciplinary spheres. Ironically enough, I'd also have to say that running and evaluating transdisciplinary and/or community-based, collaborative academic work may also be becoming a professional specialty.

Brown: Please go on.

Minnich: Right now, I think there is a relatively new problem, too. The managerial take-over of higher education in the last, say, 15 years or so is far more of a block to civic and engaged education in and for democracy than anything of what little is left of the old, discipline-bound, hierarchical academy. In systems in which prescribed results are to be delivered as efficiently as possible, we are precisely not practicing the arts of democracy, the most talkative, messy, pluralistic, individualistic, creative ideal of a free and equal collective life.

Education and democracy both thrive on inquiry, on experimentation that may enable discovery. I believe, with Dewey (and many others) that democracy and education can and ought to be deeply akin, complementary, mutually sustaining, precisely because I believe that thinking and acting are arts of freedom, and so also of indeterminate judgment with its particular kinds of responsibility. Managing to achieve predetermined results is quite different. Learning, like democracy, enacts freedom; management is designed
for predictability, presses for determinate judgment, and so requires control. In short, we have a contradiction of method and purpose when we try to manage minds or citizens, learning or acting together.

If, as educators, we cannot practice what we preach about civic life in democracy, we may contribute to, rather than counter, the increasing privatization of all our nation’s public goods, including education.

**Brown:** What “conceptual changes” do you think are needed in order to “educate democratically” as you put it?

**Minnich:** It seems to me that the calling of education now may be to help people become ever better at thinking creatively, critically, responsively and responsibly, using indeterminate and determinate judgment appropriately, in a world that is so interconnected that our powers for good, for foolishness, for triviality, for evil, are almost infinitely magnified. The margin for errors of judgment far more than of fact shrinks daily. We don’t need a few who know; we need a democracy of many who can find out, reflect, evaluate, choose, learn in an open, public, collaborative and ongoing way. So, education really does need to be rethought in close relation to democracy.

We also really do now need to focus on what we mean by action, by practice, by experience, by application, as we break out of older, dualistic and hierarchical meanings that divided mind from body, knowledge from action, truth from experience, principles from application, theory from practice, with the former terms privileged as “higher,” “purer,” and properly a guide for, rather than companion of, the latter. Democratic politics and morals suggest that, while we can maintain these distinctions, we may want to undo hierarchical divisions in favor of something more akin to a kind of contextualized complementarity.

There are related but importantly differing concepts that ought to be considered as well. For example, we behave, we do things, we make things, we work, we create. These all involve activity, but they differ; nuances of meaning, distinctions, and proliferation of terms indicate that there is rich stuff there to be thought through so that we may come closer to saying what we want to mean when we talk about action. On campuses now there is also talk of how service learning is or is not “really” civic education, and civic education is or is not “really” democratic
education. Civic, social, political: these are concepts relating to sorts and/or spheres of action and it is useful to distinguish them.

**Brown:** “Politics” and “political” are more often than not used pejoratively these days. How would you want them redefined? Do you subscribe to Hannah Arendt’s view that “political” “concerns action in a community of peers”?

**Minnich:** This, of course, extends what we were just talking about. I do think we need to rethink “political” and “politics.” It is presently distinctly not a compliment to say, “he’s very political,” and if you say someone, or someone’s art, is “political,” people assume you mean rudely ideological—not someone or something you really want around. This utter disrespect for political people is obviously a disaster for a would-be democracy, but it is very common indeed.

Arendt held that there are some ways we are active that specifically entail being in public with strangers with whom we have reason to speak, think, question, and perhaps now and again, join in making some decisions about common concerns. For Arendt, such occasions are more true to action and to the political than, say, voting, or making policy decisions, and they are most so when action springs up among equals, generating power that is precisely not force or violence but the persuasiveness of the many freely moving together. Given a chance, we do seem to want to cocreate our worlds with others, to be agents, and effective, and visibly so. With Arendt, I take this to be one of the root meanings of “happiness” as in “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

**Brown:** You have criticized “privileging” in the singular such terms as “citizen” or “politician.” Could you say more about this?

**Minnich:** Both education and democracy concern human plurality. If we were all the same, or very similar, both would be ever so much easier, and unthinkably impoverished (actually, they would be inconceivable). Both, at their best, help us enjoy what is unique or just different without collapsing into incomprehensible babble and chaos, but also without reducing ourselves to virtual clones of some one-model person. More specifically, then, blindness to the often starkly differing realities of students’ and citizens’ lived-realities tends more toward harm.
than help, so it is of some small use as a reminder to say, “the students,” “the citizens” rather than universalized singulars, “the student,” “the citizen.”

Behind such small shifts in our picturings to ourselves, and our language, is a notion about equality that holds, as I do, that it is a democratic provision precisely because it protects our plurality, our differences. “We are all equal before the law” does not mean that we are all the same. It means that the ways we really do differ in terms of wealth, say, or gender, or race, or education can be for purposes of legal decision, rendered inoperative. And that means that we can be our motley lot of selves safely—one of the glorious promises of democracy and, one keeps hoping, of education as well.

In short, democratic thinking asks us to practice being with all sorts of equalized others who just plain are not and will not and ought not be the same as we, as each other, or as any one abstract standard or norm would have us be. Democracies are messy things in which sameness, unanimity, unity may be achieved but not, if freedom and equality are really protected, for long. Democracies, and education true to it, are not monologues, anymore than “the citizen” is singular.

Brown: You would have academics “practice” the “democratic arts of associative living, action, and learning” with their students and colleagues. Does that require some kind of revolution to overthrow the current professional mind-set in order to make classrooms more democratic?

Minnich: Not if “democratic” is understood as having differing meanings and practices in different arenas, as I have suggested it can, and should. We may vote on bonds for a public park, but it would be inappropriate to vote on the date of the Magna Carta, or, infinitely discussable as it is, what Kant meant by “categorical imperative.” Mutual respect can be practiced by people in differing roles, and authority can be sustained where it is both merited and creatively, rather than rigidly, exercised.

I also think that good teaching is supportive of democracy whenever authority is not confused with dictation, with telling people what they must take in precisely as presented. A good lecture that explores, turns things around, startles with fresh thought,
presents a coherent view that invites free reflection can enliven everyone’s thinking. And of course discussion is crucial, and the practices of a good seminar can be fine education for democracy. After all, there we work to understand a text, say, from another time and place; we listen to each other; we speak as individuals engaged with others in a shareable task, and all the while we also have obligations to be truthful, informed, judicious in drawing conclusions. This, well done, is superb experience in the arts of democracy, is it not? It may even be better than being an intern at a nonprofit, during which a student experiences little other than the day-to-day slog of trying to raise money to keep understaffed programs going. What matters is learning the arts of democracy, not necessarily where we do so. “Off campus” is no more a guarantee that people value, practice, reflect on such arts than “on campus” is a guarantee that they do not. There are lousy, antiintellectual, antidemocratic experiences to be had wherever we are.

**Brown:** Your nonprofit intern example reminds me of John Dewey’s observation that education in “life experience” can lead to “inconsistencies and confusion” unless distinguished from “non-educative and miseducative experience.” How would you go about addressing Dewey’s concern?

**Minnich:** Good question; this is key to bringing action and knowledge together in education. First, it seems to me that education—except for already engaged schools such as the Evergreen State College—needs to make every effort to engage students’ experiences throughout their learning, including those they bring with them. Otherwise, learning becomes compartmentalized, unintegrated, and that is never quite safe. As a moral philosopher, I will say it can even be downright dangerous. It’s also the case that students are less interested when they must leave their experiences at the classroom door, and that’s not only sad for them but forces teachers to use external rewards and threats (grades prime among them) to substitute for the far greater rewards of genuine engagement.

So, where students are still “sent out” to “have experiences” with “real life,” but courses across the board have not been redesigned to engage (at least imaginatively) with and reflect on experiences, the infamous disconnect between learning and “real life” has not adequately been breached.
Brown: A professor at Goddard College once asked whether educators wed to their fields of expertise and to their peers, both near and far away, can also cultivate “a sense of place” with their students so they can share both the local particular as well as the universal abstract? What do you think?

Minnich: What “a sense of place” that enables participation in “the local particular as well as the universal abstract” means is obviously complex, but yes, I do agree. Good teaching should do just that: bring students into thinking relation on the one hand with the particular, the material, the individual (or, with what we can actually experience) and, on the other hand, with the universal, the abstract, the theoretical (or, with knowledge, or what we can only think, or imagine). The dangerous certainties of knowledge and of experience both dissolve when thus challenged to take each other into account. Particulars, after all, are precisely not abstract, not interchangeable, not unchanging so theories and concepts that we bring to them are at risk of violating them if, as I said, simply applied. One can, for example, know every theory there is about psychosocial development and still find it difficult to say what is going on with Mustafa Chan Fernandes, age eight, from Elm Street in Omaha. But, I hasten to add, that does not of itself discredit the generalizing theories. It just reminds us of something basic: generalizations and individuals, particulars, are both significant and must not be submitted one to the other. For scholars and professionals, this can make actual practice very frustrating—or, one hopes, recurrently interesting—but it also has political relevance. It is, of course, why I speak of indeterminate judgment—that is, judgment that relates this principle to this unique particular in ways that do violence to neither. And right there is the crux of a relation between education and democracy. If we give sovereignty, as it were, to principles, we deal in abstractions and can do serious damage to real, particular, individual people, situations, things (as ideologues do). If we reject principles in favor of particulars, or theoretical understanding in favor of individual experience, we will find it hard to know what we can or ought to do whenever our first inclinations seem questionable, our own experience provides no guide. But where we can practice with others whose thinking and judgment move freely—without certainty, but with practical wisdom—
between experience and abstraction, impulse and principle, multiple
points of view and our own values, desire for certainty and respect
for differences, well, that can practice us in the art of indeterminate
judgment, of making consequential decisions without certainty. This
becomes a realization of education as it is of democracy. Or, rather,
it is a realization of a key aspect of education fit for democracy.

**Brown:** Is the question of what institutions of higher educa-
tion can do, or do more of, to make “action” a greater part of their
curricula more suitable for particular institutions—land grant,
community colleges—than lumping all institutions of higher
education together?

**Minnich:** I can hardly hold that institutions of higher educa-
tion ought to be lumped together and expected, let alone forced,
to be the same. In the name of scholarship, of education, and of
democracy, it really does matter that we remember that sameness
and equality are quite different. Excuse me if I keep returning to
this; it is, I believe, a key issue for education as always for democracy,
so I really do object when pressure to standardize, via outcomes-
dominated management, testing, interchangeable credits across
differing kinds of schools and reduction of teachers to “content
deliverers,” are presented as serving equality. No; equality allows
our differences to flourish on shareable (not identical) grounds,
and that is quite different.

Since I do believe that any learning is enhanced by a spirit
of inquiry animating engagement with experiences, I also believe
that inviting all kinds of educational institutions to find their
own best ways to enhance such learning provides a collaborative
approach to overcoming the old unhealthily hierarchical division
between knowledge and action. Professional schools have a lot to
teach liberal arts programs about bringing learning and experi-
cence together. For example, Carnegie has done fine work here.
And the liberal arts can contribute, among other things, imagi-
native reflection and discussion to professional programs as has
happened in some medical humanities programs already.

**Brown:** Donald Schön used the term “knowing-in-action,”
which conflicts with the norms of technical rationality in research
universities where, as Schön put it, “they don’t teach what they
do, they teach research results.”
Minnich: Teaching, as Schön observes, has primarily concerned content as already-discovered knowledge, methods, techniques. Faculty have been and are held accountable for “covering the material,” and that can be so demanding a task that discussions have to be cut short; internships limited or avoided; lectures and tests over-used. Faculty also often feel that their authority as professors is specifically derived from the knowledge they have, rather than from their experience. This differs by field, although even in the highly technical professional fields, experience is usually not an adequate academic qualification.

Faculty, as noted earlier, are still usually hired, promoted, and tenured (well, the shrinking number who are) not on the basis of what they have actively done but on the basis of their research, publications, and service within the university. It is therefore an issue now that faculty who work with communities may actually hurt their chances of being promoted or tenured—or so it is feared. I hear this often, even though yes, there are universities that have extended “service” to include action with communities. Syracuse University has done so, for example.

Knowledge, we could say, is the answer to questions, the result of completed research and so is, as Dewey put it, retrospective rather than prospective. It refers to something already done, not to the doing even of its own discovery and validation processes, as Schön points out. Education driven by knowledge then becomes primarily preservation by transmission, rather than conservation through an ongoing renewal of actively intellectual, creative cultures. If we think of education more as the Eames thought of design, or Dewey thought of inquiry, or Socrates practiced philosophy, we can change figure and ground such that it is thinking and acting together that is our primary practice, and transfer of knowledge that is among its valued effects.

Brown: You have been critical of those who use knowledge as a “possession,” but isn’t knowledge increasingly shaped in an “open source” process that is socially constructed?

Minnich: I find this very interesting, and of course have no idea how it will all work out. I will say, though,
that thus far, it seems to me that knowledge—in ways distinguishable from copyright protected authorship, which I believe remains very important if we want anyone to be able to sustain a creative life—has always been social rather than individual. Knowledge is, after all, publicly validated; I cannot claim that I have knowledge if all I can adduce is my own belief in it, my own idiosyncratic derivation of it.

So, as I’ve said, I think the advent of technologies that make what is already agreed-upon and socially validated as knowledge widely available is a good thing. Perhaps, as such access spreads, we really will get beyond the old hierarchical division of “Those Who Know” from all others. We are not there yet. It will take a spread not only of technological access and capacity across all income and education lines, but also of abilities to think, to evaluate, to judge—which do not just magically arise through content-driven, let alone highly standardized, education—in order to equalize us in this area. And as of yet, education, as distinct from experience and/or abilities, of the free arts of mind is rare and available, for the most part, primarily to the already privileged. I would like that to change. What a democratic revolution that would be.

**Brown:** How would you respond to Stanley Fish’s argument that the “job” of the academy “is not to change the world but to interpret it?”

**Minnich:** Of course it is not the job of the academy to change the world if “changing the world” requires the belief that academics do know how the world should change, and how to make it do so. But if “changing the world” involves, among other things, educating future citizens who can think creatively and critically and who can act as well as work together effectively because they are practiced in the arts of democracy, then of course educators are involved in changing the world.

In truth, we are all involved in changing the world as we live and work and act among others. Work has products; actions have effects (as Aristotle long ago observed). Educators, in whose care we place our collective future in the

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*Knowledge has always been social rather than individual.*
form of our children but also the renewal of our treasured resources for meaningful lives, do have a special responsibility, though. To deny that is, perhaps worst of all, to deny that quests for truths, for beauty, for meaning shared across differing cultures and eras and spheres have effect on the world.

What we are doing now in the name of engaged democratic education is not aimed at reducing education to political ideology. On the contrary, it is to move closer to an understanding of democracy, as of education, that connects both to their still rarely realized but definitional commitments to freedom, equality, and justice. These, too, are both the grounds for the possibility of good thinking and sound knowledge, and crucial to the heritage educators are called to renew for rising generations and other newcomers. Have we overlooked or forgotten that dictators of all stripes close or purge schools; lock up scholars, writers, artists; slaughter intellectuals and professionals; shut down the liberal arts in favor of technical training; control the media? Democracy requires thinkers, and it is equally the case that thinkers require democracy. Education should therefore practice, inform, and renew both, or so I believe.

Brown: Thank you, Elizabeth. It is always a great pleasure to learn from you.
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