Suggsville USA: A Composite Case Study of Democratic Practices in Communities

BY DAVID MATHEWS

If the public that a democracy requires is a citizenry-in-motion, a citizenry working together to solve common problems and create a better life, where can it be found? Xavier de Souza Briggs thinks it is in communities. I believe he is right, even though we all recognize that communities also have conditions in them that can keep people from joining with one another. Citizens disagree on what their problems are and what is the right thing to do about them. They worry that they don't have the resources needed to act effectively. They organize a multitude of projects that move in different directions and fail to reinforce one another. They learn little from their efforts; civic momentum fails before much has been accomplished. These are all symptoms of problems of democracy.

When I say "communities," I mean placed-based, geographic communities—neighborhoods, towns, cities, counties—the places where people live, work, and raise families. These communities are constellations of small groups with quite different interests and outlooks. They aren't homogeneous.

To be sure, there are many other kinds of communities, and most of us belong to several. Some communities aren't place-based, such as those that are online. But I am talking about geographic communities, because what happens in them affects the long-term vitality of the economy, the health of residents, the education of children, the degree of resilience in the face of natural disasters, and more.

Author's note: The Suggsville story is drawn from more than 50 communities. These include Tupelo, Mississippi, as described by Vaughn L. Grisham Jr. in *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999) and Uniontown, Alabama, as described by Joe A. Sumners, with Christa Slaton and Jeremy Arthur, in *Building Community: The Uniontown Story* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 2005). Also see the Kettering publication *For Communities to Work* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2002).

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These communities need not be parochial enclaves; changes made in them may start locally but not be confined to the neighborhoods where they began. Change can and does radiate out. It begins in a shared sense that people joined together can get things done, which is called "collective efficacy."

In his book, *Great American City*, Robert Sampson (2012) wrote that:

> In neighborhoods that are otherwise similar, those with higher levels of collective efficacy exhibit lower rates of crime, not just in the present, but in the following years.… collective efficacy is relatively stable over time and . . . predicts future variations in crime, adjusting for the aggregated characteristics of individuals and more traditional forms of neighbor networks (e.g., friend/kinship ties). More important, highly efficacious communities seem to do better on a lot of other things, including birth weight, rates of teen pregnancy, and infant mortality, suggesting a link to overall health and wellbeing independent of social composition. In most cases, then, whether rich or poor, white or black … collective efficacy signals a community on a trajectory of well-being. (p. 357)

Doing the Work of Democracy

If community well-being is related to a habit of working together, people's inability to join together is a serious problem, not only for a community, but also for democracy. This piece describes ways that citizens go about the work that puts more control in their hands, and it identifies opportunities to do the work.

I think of ways of working that empower citizens as "democratic practices." I chose the word "practices" to make a distinction. Practices are more than

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techniques in that they have a value in themselves. There are techniques for hammering nails efficiently, but hammering has little value beyond the activity itself. Playing the piano, on the other hand, has a worth beyond striking a string; the playing has a value in itself. It is a practice.

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Sadly, opportunities to employ democratic practices often go unrecognized. This reinforces the fear that people can't make a difference in solving problems, a fear sometimes called by a fancy name—a loss of agency—which is the opposite of collective efficacy.

In saying that people have more opportunities to shape the future than they may recognize, I am not implying that anything is possible if people would just cooperate a little more and pull themselves up by their bootstraps. While much of what people need to make a difference is in their communities, not everything is. And citizens aren't all powerful when put up against the power of wealth or impersonal forces like globalization. Still, citizens could benefit from an array of empowering resources if they recognize their potential and the opportunities to use it.

Suggsville: Practicing the Practices

The Kettering Foundation found these opportunities by observing scores of communities. But individual cases, taken by themselves, didn't convey the significance of what we were seeing. So I have made a trade-off in presenting what Kettering learned. While sacrificing some of the authenticity of individual stories, I have created a composite town—an avatar—called Suggsville. Not wanting to claim that the foundation had found perfect communities to use as models, I based the Suggsville composite on places we had seen where conditions were less than ideal in order to emphasize the difficulties citizens encounter in doing their work.

Naming Problems to Capture What Is Most Valuable to Citizens

Suggsville was and still is rural and poor. Once a prosperous farming community, the town began to decline during the 1970s as the agricultural economy floundered. By the 1990s, the unemployment rate soared above 40 percent. Property values plummeted. With little else to replace the income from idle farms, a drug trade flourished. A majority of Suggsville's children were born to single teenagers. The schools were plagued with low test scores and troubling dropout rates. Disease rates were higher than in most communities; obesity was becoming epidemic, and alcoholism was pervasive. Nearly everyone who could leave the town had, especially college-educated young adults. Making matters worse, the community was sharply divided: rich and poor, black and white.

After church services and in the one grocery store that survived, Suggsvillians discussed what was happening with friends and neighbors. Different groups made small talk and mulled over the town's difficulties, but no decisions were made or actions taken. Then consultants from the state land-grant university who had been asked to advise made a modest suggestion—begin a town meeting where citizens could assess their situation and decide what they might do. Initially, the consultants' proposed meeting drew the predictable handful. People sat in racially homogeneous clusters—until someone rearranged the chairs into a circle and citizens began to mingle. After participants got off their favorite soapboxes, told their own stories, and stopped looking for others to blame, they eventually settled down to identifying the problems that concerned everyone. Economic security was at the top of the list, but it wasn't the only concern. Crime was another.

As the town meetings continued—slowly, sometimes haltingly—Suggsvillians laid out a number of concerns reflecting the things they valued. People didn't choose one issue and discard all the others. The need to restore economic well-being was just the first name for the town's problem, and it resonated with other concerns like family instability. The social structure and moral order seemed to be crumbling and people felt insecure.

As people added names for problems, they implicated themselves in solving them. They could do

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something about the alcoholism that was threatening both families and the social order. And they could do something about the children who suffered when adults took little responsibility for their well-being. Naming was an opportunity to regain a sense of agency.

If the Suggsville story were on video, I would pause here and explain that the town meeting and the other casual conversations were an opportunity for citizens to have a stronger hand in shaping their future. Their problems could be named in terms that resonated with the things they valued. (The practices presented here are based on insights about how democracy should work. The practices are real; that is, all have occurred at various times in many different places. The way they are described by Kettering, however, reflects the foundation's conceptualization of experience.)

It isn't difficult to find out what people consider valuable. Just ask them how a problem affects them and their family or what is at stake. Naming a problem in terms of what people hold dear (in public terms) isn't, however, simply describing it in everyday language. When people talk about what's at stake, they bring up concerns that are deeply important to most everyone: being secure from danger, being free to pursue one's own interests, being treated fairly by others.

Problems aren't always named, however, in terms of what is valuable to citizens; they are more likely to be given expert names by professionals or institutional leaders and the media. There isn't anything wrong with that as such; expert names are usually technically accurate. The unfortunate result is that these names seldom reflect the more intangible things that people care deeply about. For example, people are more likely to relate to poverty when it is named in the way they see it, which is as hunger. The result of these differences is that people don't necessarily feel any connection to issues that those in positions of authority consider important. These leaders then interpret this lack of connection as public indifference.

Expert names, particularly when used by schools and government agencies, can also suggest that there is little citizens can do about a problem. Consequently, people are disinclined to get involved because they don't see how they can make a difference. For instance, invitations from an economic development organization encouraging citizens to participate in solving a problem may sound hollow if the problem has been named in a way that doesn't relate to what people value.

Institutions eager to engage citizens might take note: naming problems in terms the public uses can facilitate the deepest kind of civic engagement because the names that reflect people's deepest concerns encourage them to own their problems. Owning problems is a potent source of energy for civic work.

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Framing Issues to Identify All the Options and the Tensions in Them

Given the concerns about the economy, one of the first proposals in what had become a series of Suggsville town meetings was to recruit a manufacturing company. The suggestion stayed on the table, although some participants had a practical objection—every other town in the state was competing for new industries. Some development authorities had recommended a grow-your-own business strategy but not convinced that this was a good recommendation, a few who felt strongly about recruiting new industry left the group and went to the state office of economic development for assistance. Nonetheless, the majority of the participants continued to discuss the recommendation to encourage local businesses. Several mentioned a restaurant that had opened recently; it promised to stimulate a modest revival downtown. Unfortunately, that promise wasn't being realized because unemployed men (and youngsters who liked to hang out with them) were congregating on the street in front of the restaurant—and drinking. Customers shied away.

At this point in the Suggsville meetings, having heard everyone's concerns, their visions for the

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town's future, and the actions they might take, there was an opportunity to create an inclusive framework for the decisions needed to make visions into realities. Public decision making is best served by a framework that includes all the major options (which are based on what people consider valuable) and also identifies tensions among the things people hold dear. Recognizing these tensions is critical in dealing with disagreements.

If framing is key to dealing with disagreements, how does it occur in real time? The everyday question, "If you are that concerned, what do you think should be done?" can start the process. As happened in Suggsville, people typically respond by talking about both their concerns and the actions they favor. The concerns are implicit in the suggestions for action.

People's concerns, and there are usually many, will generate a variety of specific proposals for action. That certainly happened in Suggsville when the issue was what to do about the faltering economy. The people in the town meetings suggested numerous courses of action to revive the economy. Almost everyone had first assumed that the problem was a lack of jobs, but that diagnosis changed as other concerns pointed to other problems.

Even though each course of action is different, they often center around one basic concern. In this case, it was the economy, so the various actions to stimulate growth were actually all parts of one option. An option is made up of actions that have the same purpose or move in the same direction.

Actions like attracting industry, encouraging startup companies, and supporting local businesses are all about creating new jobs. Other options that emerged from the meetings included creating a better place to live with actions like improving the schools, providing more programs for young people, and reducing crime. Economic development was defined as greater prosperity, not just jobs.

A framework that recognizes the major concerns and lays out the options that follow from them (along with the various actions and actors that have to be involved) sets the stage for a fair trial. For a trial to be truly fair, each option has to be presented with its best foot forward, as well as with its drawbacks.

A fair trial in public decision making engages tensions rather than avoiding them. As people wrestle with options for acting on a problem, they often find themselves pulled and tugged in different directions. These tensions invariably arouse strong feelings, and nothing will make these emotions disappear. On the other hand, if the framing begins by recognizing what citizens value, people may realize that their differences are over the means to the same ends. (The example I often use is that we all value security and freedom, although we differ on how to balance the two.) This recognition has the potential to change the tone of the disagreements. The conversation opens up and becomes less dogmatic.

Disagreement per se isn't a problem of democracy; it's ingrained in human nature and can't be solved or eliminated. In fact, a certain level of disagreement is essential in a democracy because a diversity of opinion protects against "group think" and the errors that it leads to. The problem is how disagreement is dealt with. Inevitable tensions over what is the right thing to do aren't always recognized and worked through. That's the problem that undermines democracy.

When we realize that we are pulled in different directions personally, we may become less absolute in our opinions and more attentive to the views of others, even those with whom we disagree. This openness allows us to see problems from different perspectives, which gives us a more complete view of them. This expanded understanding is crucial to effective problem solving. Redefining problems allows us to think anew about how to combat them.

Deliberating Publicly to Make Sound Decisions

At the next Suggsville town meeting, attendance was higher. Some members of the town council and a few other officials began to participate. Participants knew what was at stake: nothing less than the life of the community. They began talking about what could be done to save the restaurant. Initially, the conversation was about whom to blame for the restaurant's difficulties. The police chief argued that the problem was loitering and recommended stricter enforcement of ordinances. Others weren't

so sure. Strict enforcement, even if it worked to clear the streets, could give the community the appearance of a police state. Could people live with these consequences?

Still others worried about problems they thought contributed to the loitering. One woman suggested that loitering was symptomatic of widespread alcoholism. As citizens put their concerns on the table, they struggled with what was most important to the welfare of the community. People valued a great many things. The Suggsville that they hoped to create would be family friendly and safe for kids. It would have good schools as well as a strong economy.

Yet everything that would have to be done to reach those objectives had potential downsides, as was the case with stricter law enforcement. Tensions were unavoidable. People had to decide what was really most valuable to the community. They seemed ready to weigh the potential consequences of different options against the things they held dear.

Step outside Suggsville again and look at the opportunity to turn a discussion into public deliberations that would weigh various options against all the things people held dear. The door was open to raise questions in the meeting like, "if we did what you suggest, and it worked—yet also had negative consequences—would you still stand by your proposal?"

The work of deliberative decision making—choice work—occurs in stages, never all at once. (The concept of stages in deliberation comes from Daniel Yankelovich's book (1991), *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*.) One town meeting or forum isn't enough. Stages aren't steps in a sequence but points along the way in an evolving process. Initially, in some communities, citizens may not be sure whether there is an issue they should be concerned about. In the first stage, people have to decide if anything dear to them is at stake. A bit later, they may become aware of a problem that touches on something they value, yet simply gripe about it. The "issue" is whom to blame. At this stage, people may not see the tensions or the necessity for citizens to act. When the tensions do become apparent, people usually struggle as they weigh the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Eventually, citizens may work through an issue and settle on a range of actions that move in a common direction.

Seeing the public move through these stages caused Dan Yankelovich to realize that a democratic citizenry has a learning curve. That is, people don't simply gather information and come to a new understanding of a problem. Their understanding evolves, often moving in spurts rather than along a smooth trajectory. The point is that the public can learn—perhaps not quickly and certainly not perfectly—but more often than not.

These stages have important implications for institutional leaders and officeholders. Knowing where citizens are (and aren't) in their thinking is crucial for engaging them. When citizens aren't sure there is a problem, leaders may be well advised to start where people start, even though experts may have moved on in their thinking. Citizens may not be ready to consider solutions at this point. The issue that has to be addressed is the *nature* of the issue; what exactly is at issue?

When people do, indeed, recognize there is a serious issue, yet still look for a scapegoat, revisiting the nature of the problem seems likely to be more helpful than officials pounding away at the solution they favor. Even when citizens move past blaming, they may be unsure of what their options are and what tradeoffs they will have to make. At that stage, they are susceptible to being polarized, particularly if politicians engage in a hard-sell strategy. However, once people reach the point of struggling with tradeoffs, they are more likely to be open to information that is relevant to their concerns.

When a citizenry does finally settle on a general direction to move, they don't produce a set of instructions for officials to carry out, but officials should have a clearer sense of what the citizenry will or won't support. In some cases, officials will think that the best course of action is outside the boundaries of what is politically permissible. In these situations, public deliberations can tell officeholders how the citizenry went about making up its mind so that officials can engage this thinking when they believe it errs.

Identifying and Committing Resources

As people in Suggsville were working through tensions, some civic groups were already taking action or planning to. Deciding and acting were intertwined. Worried that there were too many youngsters with too little adult supervision, several community organizations responded with offers of things they were willing to do if others would join them: organize baseball and softball leagues, provide after-school classes, expand youth services in the churches, form a band. The observation that alcoholism was contributing to the town's difficulties prompted other participants in the meetings to propose that a chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous be established. Where would it meet? Someone offered a vacant building free of charge. As more projects developed and citizens called on others to join them, new recruits began coming to the meetings. Rather than deciding on a single solution, people mounted an array of initiatives that were loosely coordinated because the initiatives were reasonably consistent with the sense of direction that was emerging from the deliberations.

Because decisions aren't self-implementing, Suggsvillians were busy identifying and committing resources. As people came to see their economic problems more clearly, resources that had been unrecognized or seemed irrelevant took on new significance. The same was true of the people and organizations that control those resources. Suggsvillians who knew how to coach youngsters to play baseball weren't an asset until community revitalization was seen as more than a strictly economic problem.

The resources needed to implement a decision are sometimes hidden in unlikely places. In one of the poorest sections of Suggsville, some people were concerned about what their youngsters were (and weren't) learning. The congregation of a nearby church responded. Members found resources for improving education among the very people typically thought to have little to offer—even those with little education. They discovered these resources by asking a series of questions: What do you know how to do well? Where did you learn it? What helped you learn it? Have you ever taught anyone anything? What do you think made your teaching effective? (These questions came out of the Solomon Project, which worked with low-income communities in Minneapolis to "recognize their own educational capacities." See *The Solomon Project Annual Report*). People's first reaction was, "I never taught anybody anything," perhaps because they associated teaching with classrooms. Later, however, they described numerous ways in which they had, in fact, educated others. They had taught basic skills like cooking, sewing, and taking care of equipment. Their "lessons" included the virtues of patience, persistence, and sacrifice. Such resources are genuine assets; they help solve problems. And when people recognize they have these resources, it gives them a sense of agency, of being able to make a difference.

In order for citizens to see themselves as actors, recognizing their resources can be prompted early on in framings to promote deliberation by identifying all potential actors. Institutions—governments, schools, hospitals, and major NGOs—are obvious actors; yet while necessary, they are seldom enough to deal with a community's most persistent problems, which come from many sources and require some response from every sector of a community.

Unfortunately, in many communities these local resources are never identified; institutional politics has taken over. Citizens may have named and framed an issue, but professionals can step in, unintentionally pushing citizens out. Institutions tend to rely on familiar routines like strategic planning, which doesn't normally have provisions for civic work. Professionals often assume that once people have spoken, it's time for citizens to step back and for professionals to follow-up with their resources.

Another reason the work citizens can do with citizens is overlooked is that institutional and political leaders have been frustrated in trying to engage people. Furthermore, institutions have money and legal authority; they can rely on enforceable contracts. The democratic public can't command people or deploy equipment, and it seldom has any legal authority.

Then why do people do things like organizing rescue parties after natural disasters when there is no financial inducement or legal obligation? After all, entering a devastated neighborhood isn't just

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time consuming; it can be dangerous. Often people will commit to such an effort and carry out what they've promised to do if their commitments are made public. Their fellow citizens will expect it of them. These commitments are reinforced when others promise to use their resources. Norms of reciprocity come into play. As happened in Suggsville, it isn't uncommon for deliberative decision making to be followed by mutual promises to commit resources, either at public forums or subsequent meetings.

Organizing Complementary Acting

As civic work in Suggsville progressed, several people returned to the argument that, while encouraging local businesses was fine, it would never provide enough jobs to revive the economy. The town still had to attract outside investment, they insisted. Someone quickly pointed out that the center of town, especially the park, was so unsightly that no one of sound mind would consider Suggsville an attractive location for a new business. Even though some saw little connection between the condition of the park and recruiting industry, no one denied that the town needed a facelift. Suggsville's three-member sanitation crew, however, had all it could do to keep up with garbage collection. Did people feel strongly enough about the cleanup to accept the consequences? Would they show up to clean the park themselves? In the past, responses to similar calls had been minimal. This time, after one of the community forums, a group of people committed to gathering at the park the following Saturday with rakes, mowers, and trash bags.

During most of these community meetings, the recently elected mayor sat quietly, keeping an eye on what was happening. The forums had begun during his predecessor's administration, and the town's new leader felt no obligation to them. In fact, he was a bit suspicious of what the participants were doing. Members of the town council feared the public meetings would result in just another pressure group. But no one made any demands on the town government, although some citizens thought it strange that the mayor hadn't offered to help with the cleanup. Then, before Saturday arrived, people were surprised to find that the mayor had sent workers to the park with trucks and other heavy equipment to do what the tools brought from home couldn't.

Opportunities for the citizenry to act emerge as people decide on common directions and shared purposes. This is what happened in Suggsville. Just as the public has its own distinctive resources, it also has its own distinctive way of organizing action and acting. Government agencies act on behalf of the public, and people act individually by volunteering for all sorts of civic projects. Both are beneficial; neither is the public acting. When a citizenry acts, different groups launch an armada of small initiatives.

Although the citizenry acts in a variety of ways, these initiatives reinforce one another when they have a shared sense of direction or purpose, which can emerge from public deliberations. The result—complementary acting by citizens—is not only multifaceted but also mutually reinforcing; various civic efforts "complete" one another. This is different from cooperation coordinated by civic organizations. Complementary civic action employs people's capacity for self-organizing.

Human beings seem to have a capacity for organizing themselves, a capacity most evident when natural disasters sweep away all avenues for outside assistance. Self-organizing among people not kin to or alike one another probably dates back to the time before there were chiefdoms; a time when there was little hierarchy but a need for self-organizing in order to survive. That was long before the Greeks coined the term "democracy."

While complementary acting requires a degree of coordination (everyone should show up to clean up the park on the same day), it isn't administratively regulated and doesn't have administrative expenses. This means that the cost of getting things done is usually lower than institutional costs.

The payoff from complementary public acting goes beyond the tangible products of civic work. The work people do together like cleaning up a park is valued, not just because the park is nicer, but because it demonstrates that people joining forces can make a difference. And when people work together, they get a more realistic sense of what they can expect from one another. This is political trust, which isn't quite the same as personal trust and shouldn't be confused with it. Political trust can develop among people who aren't family or friends. All that is necessary is

for citizens to recognize they need one another to solve their community's problems. That recognition builds pragmatic relationships.

The ability of complementary acting to supplement rather than substitute for institutional action has long been recognized in research on urban reform. For instance, in a chapter in the book *Strategies for School Equity: Creating Productive Schools in a Just Society*, Clarence Stone (1998) reported that people and institutions that form alliances in city neighborhoods accomplish far more than any institution alone could.

Institutions should have little difficulty in encouraging complementary acting when they value and make a place for it.

Learning as a Community

Although the restaurant held its own, new industry didn't come to Suggsville. Drug traffic continued to be a problem, yet people's vigilance, together with more surveillance by the police department, reduced the trade. The crowd loitering on the streets dwindled away. More people attended the A.A. meetings even though alcoholism remained an issue. A new summer recreation program became popular with young people, and teenage pregnancies decreased a bit, as did high school dropout rates.

In time, the ad hoc Suggsville improvement group became an official civic association. As might be expected, the organization had the usual internal disputes that detracted from community problem-solving. Still, when a controversy was brewing in the community or an emerging issue needed to be addressed, citizens used the association to bring people together.

Some projects didn't work. In most instances, when that happened, association members adjusted their sights and launched more initiatives. Perhaps this momentum had something to do with the way the association involved the community in evaluating projects. The association regularly convened meetings where citizens could reflect on what the community had learned, regardless of whether the projects succeeded. Success wasn't as important as the lessons that could be used in future efforts.

Suggsville had become a learning community. In this collective or public learning, the citizenry or community itself learns, and the learning is reflected in changed behavior. Suggsville, for example, changed the way it did business when the town meetings took hold. The founders moved on and the membership fluctuated, but the improvement association that sponsored the forums was still operating years after it was formed.

There are obviously a great many opportunities for a citizenry to learn after a community has acted on a problem. Everyone wants to know whether the effort has succeeded. The press declares the results to be beneficial, harmful, or inconsequential. One-on-one conversations bubble up in the grocery store. Outside evaluators make "objective" assessments. The citizenry, however, may not learn a great deal from the media's conclusions, chance conversations, or professional evaluations.

One reason the citizenry doesn't learn can be the unintentional interference from certain types of conventional, outcome-based evaluations using neutral evaluators. In order for a community to learn, people have to focus on themselves as a community. The evidence to be evaluated can't just be what projects have achieved; it has to include how well citizens have worked together. That said, public learning could supplement the outcome-based assessments that are often required by funders.

Public learning is distinctive in that the results aren't just measured against fixed, predetermined goals. When a democratic citizenry learns, both the objectives of civic efforts and their results have to be on the table for inspection, not just the results alone. As people learn, they may realize that what they first thought was most valuable turned out not to be as important as it seemed initially.

Opportunities for public learning aren't confined to final evaluations; they can occur all along as citizens do their work. To name an issue in public terms is to learn what others value. To frame an issue is to learn about all of the options for action—as well as the tensions that need to be worked through. To decide deliberatively is to learn which actions are consistent or inconsistent with what is held most valuable. To identify resources is to learn what resources are

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relevant, and where potential allies might be found. To organize complementary action is to learn which initiatives can reinforce one another.

In many ways, public learning is renaming, reframing, and deciding again—after the fact. It is deliberation in reverse. The questions are much the same: Should we have done what we did? Was it really consistent with what we now think is most important?

The greatest benefit of public learning is an increase in civic capacity as a result of what Hannah Arendt (1977), drawing upon the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, called an "enlarged mentality," the ability to see things from others' points of view, in her book *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (p. 220–221). Public learning develops a citizenry's capacity for seeing new possibilities in life. You might say it improves civic eyesight.

Learning communities are like the ideal student who reads everything assigned and then goes to the library or searches the internet to find out more. These communities don't copy a model or use a formula. Rather than trying to follow best practices, learning communities study what others have done but adapt what they see to their own circumstances. They create better practices.

Community projects that aim primarily for immediate success tend to end when their goals have been met. This can occur even if problems remain. On the other hand, projects that don't succeed disappoint citizens, and they, too, stop. So success and failure can have the same result: people may quit in either case. When communities are learning, they tend to push ahead because they look beyond success and failure. As Rudyard Kipling wrote, they "treat those two imposters just the same." If the work in learning communities goes well, people try to improve on it. If the work fails, they learn from their mistakes.

Learning by and in a community is more than acquiring and disseminating information. It is more than evaluating civic efforts. It is a mindset about change and progress, an attitude that is open to experimentation and reflective in the face of failure. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." And if you do succeed, raise the bar and aim higher. Public learning is a political mindset that makes for a democratic culture.

What Happened?

Attendance at the Suggsville association meetings continued to rise and fall depending on which problems were being addressed. Some association members worried about these fluctuations; others thought getting people to come to meetings was less important than building ties with other civic groups and rural neighborhood coalitions, as well as with institutions like the county law enforcement agencies, the economic development office, and the health department. Creating networks was a priority. Several people dropped out because they wanted the association to play a more partisan role. But the association refused to get drawn into local election campaigns or to endorse special causes.

Suggsville wouldn't make anyone's list of model communities today; still, the town has changed: citizens have a greater ability to influence their future. Asked what the years of civic work produced, one Suggsvillian said it was learning how to work together.

Building on What Grows

Much of the progress in Suggsville was based on making use of what was already happening or capitalizing on potentials waiting to be realized. All of the practices used to do the work of citizens were adapted from familiar routines. People were already talking about how the town's problems were affecting them. They were already thinking about what should be done and about their options. The town meetings just put these efforts to use in renaming and reframing issues so that citizens could be involved on their own terms.

Many of the resources needed to combat some of the town's problems were available in unlikely places, even in the educating that people with little formal schooling could provide. As John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) have shown, identifying untapped assets can be more powerful than focusing on needs. Suggsville's greatest accomplishment was in seeing the potential in what

already existed. In a town that could have been defined by what it couldn't do, people were able to show that there were some things they could do. Certainly not entirely alone, certainly not without some outside help, the townspeople started essentially within. They may not have used the phrase "collective efficacy," but they had it. Eventually, Suggsville changed its political culture—changed the way it went about its business. You might say that it developed an asset-based democracy with a strategy of starting with what was already happening or available nearby.

It is also significant that the practices used in the town weren't separate, stand-alone efforts. Rather, they fit together much like the *matrëška* (matryoshka) nesting dolls from Russia. This coherence made it possible to bring about a new way of doing business. When people laid out their options for acting on a problem, they continued to mull over the name that best captured what was really at issue. Even as they moved toward making a decision, they kept revising both the framework and the name of the problem. As they deliberated, people anticipated the actions that would need to be taken and the commitments they might have to make. They recalled lessons learned from past efforts. Citizens made commitments to act while they were still deliberating, and they deliberated while they were still acting. They were also learning all along the way.

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