FUTURE CHALLENGES IN TEACHING AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD POLICY

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July 1981

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Introduction

Challenges in the teaching of public agricultural and food policy arise from two sources: the policy environment and the perceptions of the teacher. Policy offers an arena for exciting and rewarding teaching hardly matched by any subject matter in our discipline because of the richness of the challenges continually emanating from these sources. One of our own kind, Luther Tweeten (p. 853), in his presidential address last year dramatized one of the challenges which he found presented by the policy environment: "The underachieving macroeconomy is the single most important characteristic of the economic environment facing agriculture in the 1980's." Only a few weeks later, one of our inspiring deans of public policy, Carroll Bottum (p. 185-6), traced with his unique conviction the origin in the 1940's, and subsequent validation, of two fundamental perceptions of policy education, namely: (1) that the objective of policy education is to improve the capabilities of the individual to participate in public policy decision-making; and (2) that the approach to policy education is through alternatives and their consequences.

It is from just such intellectual well-springs of ideas, techniques, and materials that we in public policy teaching continually find nourishment. Yet, in no other subject area is the burden heavier for the individual teacher to continually self-evaluate, appraise the future needs, and design the educational response to perceived challenges. I wish to sketch three of these needs--or problems/questions if you please--that I believe must be critically

Presented at a symposium, the annual meeting of the American Agricultural Economics Association, July 27, 1981.

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answered by each of us if we are to meet the future challenges in teaching policy. In order to take advantage of the unique opportunity this particular symposium affords us to share and critique particular teaching approaches and resources about which we have experience to share, I will focus on these three overall strategy questions which appear to me to be squarely on our agenda, and then reserve the discussion of specifics for the "break-out session" to follow: (1) Which level of student academic maturity are we serving? (2) What is the subject matter content that has priority in our instruction? and (3) How should we proceed to teach?

Course Level of Our Teaching

No single course in public policy concerned with agriculture and food is likely to respond adequately to the needs of all of our students in those departments offering the full range of degrees. It is no more logical in policy than in marketing, management, or quantitative analysis, but neither are as many levels of courses usually needed. Two course levels are minimal, and can be sufficient. The important issue is that the question be addressed with scholarly responsibility and that each of us as teachers realize and accept the objective of our course level.

The need for course layering in policy differs from some of our other areas of agricultural economics because of both the availability of complementary courses on most of our campuses and due to the desirability to build on prerequisite areas of knowledge. Public policy is surely solidly rooted in the subjects of economics and political science, in addition to such general understandings as communicating and the nature of knowledge. The first provides insights into the operations of the economic system and the other into that of the public decision-making system. Hence, a "beginning" lower division course is less critical than is such a course, for example, in management. However, this assumes that the first policy course is preceded
by basic economics and political science knowledge. One implication is clear. Previous course time can be dissipated in "reteaching" the principle of economics and the functioning of a democratic, representative system.

Then, what can be a functional differentiation between at least two course levels. I suggest that the first level course, perhaps for upper division and beginning graduate students, focus on five topics: What is the meaning of public agricultural and food policy in a representative political system? What are the recent economic trends in the world and U.S. particularly relevant to this policy? What has been the evolution of agricultural and food policy in the U.S. and selected foreign countries about land, research, credit, trade, prices and income, and human and resource development? What are the current policy issues and alternatives? What are the primary processes and who are the participants in current policy formation?

The second level course--or at least one of them and probably only for graduate students--could then focus on a type of educational experience designed to develop professionally relevant abilities to pursue systematic economic analysis of public policies. This course, using the format of a seminar to provide a maturing experience toward an independent, creative, critical, and responsible analyst, would include performances on the part of the graduate students of: (1) critical reviews of particular examples of policy research from the literature of the past and present; and (2) a presentation and defense of a possible policy research effort of interest to the student.

Note that these are not the same courses offered simply at two levels. The understandings of the first course, as well as of the fundamentals of economic theory, quantitative analysis, and political economy, are assumed as prerequisites to this second course, to be acquired either by formal study or experience. The distinction recognizes that the first course may be terminal for most of those enrolled as both agricultural economics majors and
students with other agricultural majors as well as from other colleges. This first course should develop in each of these students, likely to be future leaders as well as responsible citizens, the ability in the area of public policy, as Neil Harl urged at the 1979 AAEA Teaching Workshop, "to think and reason—creatively, analytically, thoroughly, and with reasonable alacrity."

For the graduate students in the second course, it should develop the ability to understand as well as pursue policy research, education, and policy-making in the same systematic, scholarly, positive manner as any other field of science and scholarship. In doing so, this course experience is not another theory course per se, nor is it another series of lectures on the history of policy. It is presenting professional policy work just as exciting, demanding, and analytical as other subject matter.

Ken Farrell (p. 791), spoke to some of the needs at this graduate course level in his presidential address:

"Reorientation of our agenda and development of more effective research and education institutions are long-term processes requiring adjustments of several types. Some are as basic as altering curricula in graduate schools to provide greater diversity in training and exposure to institutional economics, welfare economics, and policy-applied disciplines such as political science and philosophy. Just as basic is the need to instill a greater sense of commitment to analysis of public policy issues on the part of those already practicing."

Content in Our Policy Teaching

Regardless of the policy course level, an important challenge for the future teacher will be that of content. It is well to begin by recognizing that one cannot cover "everything." The field of public policy is too expanding, changing, inclusive, and intertwined with other subject matter to attempt "completeness." But this is not all bad, for it immediately
confronts the teacher with the sober reality that policy teaching—and
maybe all teaching—is not to inculcate the student with a reservoir of
truths and conclusions from which withdrawals can be made through life.
Rather, if the emphasis is upon developing creative, problem-solving abili-
ties which the student will subsequently use to understand new public pro-
blems, to selectively search for understandings from the changing literature,
and to formulate new policy answers, then the course need not "cover it all."
Perhaps equally important, the content of a policy course is likely to
change more at each offering than for most other areas of agricultural eco-
nomics. Whether the topic deals with the stream of price and income policy,
for which a new installment is about to be added with the 1981 Act, or deals
with a critique of policy research, for which each new issue of our Journals
provide fresh examples, the policy course content is destined to change.

The overall content mix for the different levels of policy courses was
identified earlier. In addition, I believe there are three issues about
proper policy course content that will challenge us in the future.

International Policy Issues

First, policy issues related to international trade, agricultural de-
velopment, and agricultural policies of foreign governments will become in-
creasingly prominent on the future teaching agenda. They must be adequately
treated if our covenant with students—the future leaders of our nation—is
honored. Alternative approaches to this issue are possible depending upon
the ways courses are packaged and curricula designed at each institution.
In some cases, this may warrant a separate course in the Policies of Other
Countries. However, I will argue this poses too great a risk of presenting
U.S. policy questions as insulated from the rest of the world, and of segre-
gating U.S. and foreign students into separate policy courses.

Although the organizational problems of integrating the study of
policies of the U.S. and other nations burdens the teacher, I believe it is worth the cost. A logical interweaving can occur around these junctures of the course: as the world food supply and demand trends are pared with those trends for the U.S.; as the pattern of agricultural development policies of selected foreign countries, both developed and developing, are examined alongside the developmental policies of this country; and as examples of alternative price and income policies are drawn from both the foreign and domestic scene.

**Governmental Policy in a Representative Political System**

A second content issue that will continue to be a challenge in the teaching of policy is the nature of public policy itself. How one views the origin and status of policy vs. idea, of public policy vs. private policy, and of all governmental action vs. public policy are likely to affect one's analysis and professional performance. We do not have a clear conceptual foundation built block by block of the meaning of public policy, as can be found in the lead-off chapter of textbooks for such areas as chemistry, mathematics, or even economics. As a result of our dilemma, every policy writer deals from a personal set of meanings about policy, and all too easily, any economist can self-proclaim in the role of a policy analyst.

I submit that public policy seems almost by logical imperative to be governmental actions taken in a participatory system such as ours, which expends substantial resources and talent to shape these policies around the continually changing values of the people. I further submit that whenever the composite of these governmental actions can be plausibly termed "the problem" of society, as has been done by public officials in high places, rather than viewing governmental actions as "solving the problems," then we have serious conceptual issues about the subject matter of policy. It could be likened to discourse about physics as the problem instead of
discoursing about problems in physics. Such conceptual questions must have a proper place in our policy course content or confusion, disillusionment, and counterproductive effort will snuff out constructive public policy formation.

**Normativism in Policy**

A final critical content issue in policy teaching is the age-old, yet revitalized issue, of normative values in policy, and economics generally. It is not so much that the "right" conceptualization be taught, but rather that the fundamental issues of the logical substance of theory, economic analysis, and policy be raised. Students should be confronted with questions, about which different answers result in different professional performance, in different communications to the public, and in different roles played by the professional. Questions that have not gone away in two hundred years of systematic economics are: Does theory have a prescriptive or predictive attribute? Can economic analysis produce "good," "right," or "publicly desirable" actions? Are researchers and teachers of policy a reliable source of policy recommendations for anyone besides themselves and the interest groups they may represent?

In our Association's commissional review of policy in its surveys of agricultural economics literature, an honored elderstatesman in policy, George Brandow (p. 281) concluded, "Economists would do well to go back to A. C. Pigou and forthrightly adopt his proposition [instead of Pareto's] that a narrowing of the personal distribution of income increases welfare if the national product is not reduced." To put this issue in a contemporary context, Kenneth Boulding at least year's national public policy education conference called for a discipline of "normative science" to apply to the ethic and method of science to chronic public policy question plaguing mankind (p. 9). Normativism is one content issue that must not be bypassed in our policy teaching.
Teaching of Public Policy

Every teacher of public policy about agriculture and food faces yet a third challenge, how to teach policy. The philosophy of education, psychology of learning, and teaching methodology are all respected fields of scholarship of their own. Four national teaching workshops sponsored by AAEA over the past twenty years and long-standing regional teaching symposia organized by Colleges of Agriculture, NACTA and other similar groups have brought this knowledge base into our midst. I am still appalled at the anomaly that the teaching of policy—and other courses in higher education—requires no preparation for the educational function, as I also am about doctors of philosophy implying no systematic study of philosophy. Still, that is the "imperfect" world in which our professional role as teachers is pursued. Policy teachers need this kind of systematic discipline-oriented preparation, subject matter interest, and in-service education no less than do our colleagues—but also perhaps no more.

Apart from this challenge of preparing ourselves professionally about, how to teach, I want to briefly identify a uniqueness that challenges teachers of public policy. It arises from the nature of our subject, namely, decision-making by a representative society. I wish to argue that the learning of this subject matter by the student is significantly enhanced by simulated experiences in this decision-making process. Just as the student of agronomy learns by working with plants in the greenhouse, that of physics by working with forces in the laboratory, and that of business management by playing management games, so the student of policy learns partly by participating in group problem identification, analysis of alternatives, and searching for the inevitable group compromise. Public policy-making is not the same as the management of a firm, corporation, military establishment, interest group, or an authoritarian government. This indispensable knowledge about
the participatory compromising process is not normally acquired in the "growing up" on a farm, in a family, and in a private enterprise economy.

Using the teaching process as a vehicle to develop understandings about the nature of public policy-making can involve many activities such as: carefully moderated class discussion, debates, seminars, mock legislative assemblies, simulated governmental bodies, and student reports based on independent study. Of the several alternative teaching methods shared by Carl O'Connor at the 1979 AAEA Teaching Workshop, the "guided design" approach seems most promising to meet this challenge for the teaching of policy. In focusing on "developing the decision-making skills required to apply what has been learned to the solution of real-world problems" and on helping the student to deal with "ambiguity" and indeterminancy, this approach could well enrich the lecture, discussion, and audio-tutorial methods which we all must use to a degree.

Concluding Observation

In a discussion before a session similar to this one at the 1979 AAEA meetings, I summarized an evaluation of Agricultural and Food Policy Education as follows: we as teachers of policy are achieving grades of A to B in the necessary areas of understanding of Economics Theory and Quantitative Analyses; however, we are achieving grades ranging from C- to failing in the necessary areas of understandings about: (1) the conceptual issues surrounding public policy; (2) alternative policies for public problems on the current agenda; and (3) participatory experience through education in policy critique and dialogue. This is where I believe our greatest challenges lie in the future as we teach public policy about agriculture and food.
References


