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PUBLIC ISSUES EDUCATION AND THE NPPEC

*Walter J. Armbruster
Farm Foundation*

Public policy education evolved from the work of agricultural economists involved in commodity policy extension work. These subject matter specialists were looking for ways to improve their effectiveness as educators while avoiding the pitfalls of taking a position on the policy issues. They focused on identifying important policy issues; developing alternatives for dealing with those issues; and analyzing the consequences of each of those alternatives, all in an objective, educational mode. The “issues-alternatives-consequences” model that evolved combined “content” expertise and “process” methodology, though most emphasis was placed on content, including much outside of commodity policy.

Public policy education specialists have dealt with more than commodity policy as reflected in the National Public Policy Education Conference agenda over the years. In 1990, Barr and Flinchbaugh reviewed program topics for the policy conference and found that commodity, and closely-related, policy was of decreasing importance, although it always had been only part of the forty-year-old conference agenda.

Nonetheless, the public policy education specialists and the National Public Policy Education Committee (NPPEC) continue to be viewed as focused almost entirely on agricultural commodity policy. That perception is reinforced by the fact that the most visible outputs from the NPPEC over the past fifteen plus years, other than the conference proceedings, have been the periodic farm bill projects. The one exception is Module 6, “Education for Public Decisions,” of the *Working With Our Publics* project. Module 6 was high quality, but has been the most widely used of the modules because it was “pre-sold” to a network of specialists with subject matter credibility. These specialists were drawn upon as authors and reviewers. The NPPEC promotion of the module was extremely helpful in creating demand for, and use of, the materials. However, Module 6 is identified as a part of the overall project for which others are credited.

In recent years the public policy education “content” arena has embraced home economics (or human ecology) and family issues; environmental, water quality, and other socioeconomic issues important to agriculture, rural communities and society at large; and other policy issues of broad interest to the general populace.

Methodological or “process” developments have included increasing attention to a broader definition of the public policy education methodology, redefining or broadening the inclusiveness of some of the concepts. For example, Hahn has focused some attention on bias versus balance as opposed to the “objectivity” frequently cited as an element of the public policy education process.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation funded eleven projects in its Innovative Public Policy Education Project Cluster, administered jointly with Farm Foundation. Only a few of the seventy project proposals were submitted by “established” public policy education specialists. Of the eleven funded projects, only three were from these specialists and none focused on commodity policy.

The eleven Kellogg projects incorporated team building skills; coalition development and nurturing; bringing together a range of interests to discuss policy issues; leadership development for those groups needing to be empowered to work in the policy arena; community or interest group problem solving workshops to develop understanding of public policy education methodology; and involving participants in agenda development. The project coalitions brought together a diverse group of land grant university and other organization personnel that had a knowledge base and an interest in the policy issues involved. In some coalitions, land grant university personnel were not even included. These projects utilized a variety of “process” techniques to reach their objectives.

Recently, “public issues education” has been brought forward as an action plan to provide extension staff, from specialists down through county staff, an increased understanding of how to successfully work on controversial public issues in an educational context. The proponents of public issues education clearly saw the increasing involvement of extension educators in controversial issues. But beyond that, they recognized the need to provide an in-service educational program and developed a *specific* proposal to obtain funding to do such in-service programming. They developed the proposal under the public issues education label and have received Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) endorsement. That label was selected at least partially because of concerns among some extension leaders that “policy” implies political involvement or perhaps even making or advocating recommendations for specific policy alternatives. “Issues,” on the other hand, has a more benign connotation to many and is viewed as more amenable to education.

Public policy education specialists and the National Public Policy Education Committee have for some time recognized the need for increasing understanding of the public policy education methodology as a useful tool for an increasing number of extension employees. However, we have never proposed specific action. Given the ECOP

adoption of the public issues education action plan, what role is there for public policy education specialists?

You may contribute individual knowledge of the public policy education process and provide training to increase the understanding of it by extension specialists and county staff in your state. You may contribute disciplinary excellence to the educational programs to broaden understanding of the controversial public issues by helping identify alternative solutions and analyzing their consequences. Or you may choose to do nothing, view public issues education as entirely focused on “process” and act as if you still have control of the “content” agenda.

Clearly, public issues education training must emphasize the importance of having access to, and incorporating into educational programming, a sound content knowledge base. There exists ample opportunity for public policy education specialists to get involved. You must decide what you wish to do, either individually or as a group. I suggest that the NPPEC appoint a Public Issues Education Task Force to work with the two ECOP subcommittees charged with implementing the action plan, the Personnel and Organization Development Committee (PODC) and the Program Leadership Committee (PLC). Specialists affiliated with the NPPEC have the practical experience in the core issues-alternatives-consequences methodology framework upon which public issues education must build. They have increasingly drawn upon emerging process techniques to implement effective education on controversial public issues. They are in the best position to lead the effort to develop the in-service education programming to increase the understanding by extension staff, including specialists and those in the counties, of how to do public issues education. The stage is set! Let’s get on with the task!

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