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# ISSUES, ALTERNATIVES AND CONSEQUENCES

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## **Milestones in Public Policy Education**

More than sixty years have passed since Purdue professors Carroll Bottum and Heavy Kohlmeyer invented what is known as the alternatives-consequences approach to public policy education. Necessity was truly the mother of this invention. I see the history of public policy education marked by five milestones with theirs being the first.

Milestone 2 occurred in 1949-1950 when M. L. Wilson, then director of federal extension work and Frank Peck, director of Farm Foundation, convened policy educators at the first National Public Policy Education Conference. Wilson set the philosophical tone, quoting from a Land-Grant College Association report: "It is not the function of this Committee . . . to determine what agricultural policies shall be adopted. That is the responsibility of the Nation's citizens" (Wilson, p. 9).

Milestone 3 came along in 1973 when Charles Gratto taught us his Issue Evolution-Educational Intervention Model. It gave us a visual way to both differentiate and relate politics and education.

Milestone 4 began in 1975 when public policy education was taught to county agents and specialists in home economics and community development, making it obvious that the methodology applies across disciplines and program areas.

Milestone 5—the decade of the 80s—was when literature emerged to document the processes used to educate about public policy (House and Young, Infanger).

Will today be another milestone? Perhaps not, but I predict that the 1990s will be the time of adapting our methods to modern communications and politics. Now that the methodology is in print and the extension system is urging us to employ it, strengths and limitations are being discussed. Some people do not want to use it and that, I suppose, is how Dr. Hite and I came to be on your agenda this morning. There are many reasons for this aversion, some of them captured in the paired articles by Cunningham and me in *Adult Edu-*

cation (Cunningham, House 1990b). Some suspect anything this old must be outdated. For some people, education is just too slow compared to politics. Others tell me that the focus is too narrow. But the most damning is that objectivity is actually a “cop-out,” an avoidance of social responsibility.

I have been a good listener; now it is my time to speak. I predict that by 1995, policy educators will have learned new skills in communications and mediation and we will have re-examined the costs of advocacy and embraced objectivity. Policy education may be a part of “public issues education”—or it may not. Regardless, the alternatives-consequences approach will remain the essence of educating about controversial issues. If it does not, the extension system will simply be an information branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and our educational function will have been truncated.

Those are my milestones and my predictions. My paper covers just three topics. First, so that we all understand the alternatives-consequences approach, I will review it briefly. Second, I will compare and contrast the social functions of science, education and politics and various policy roles played by academics. Third, I will explain why, when we are dealing with controversial issues, objectivity is essential, not just objectivity in science but also in education.

### **The Alternatives-Consequences Approach**

The alternatives-consequences approach is simple:

1. *Define the issue as a problem.* Issues divide us, but problems are something we can solve. Language matters. For example, people are divided pro and con by simply hearing the words abortion or family planning. But, except for a few backwaters, “preventing teen pregnancy” can be used to engage the public in solving what is perceived to be a common problem. Defining the problem also requires doing some research to understand its motive and extent.
2. *List the alternative solutions.* Include the status quo.
3. *State the consequences of each alternative.* Communicate research results.
4. *Educate.* Create interaction.
5. *Fade.* Move into the shadows. Go work on something else.

It is that simple. Yet, the alternatives-consequences approach empowers us to proceed with education when the context is dominated by controversy. Think about it. People who are angry listen. We can defuse emotion. We can depersonalize the conflict. We can apply research to real problems. Each interest group wants us to publicize *their* solution, but if we are fair to all propositions (including the status quo) they will let us redistribute power in the form of under-

standing. We help them confront the issue with problem-solving processes. We give them the best information we have. We help them discuss it rationally with their neighbors. We are empowered by their willingness to learn.

The alternatives-consequences approach is also demanding. It presumes we want to be teachers and are not afraid to work directly with the people. That is quite different from, for example, penning pithy policy prescriptions from the safety of one's office or using television to project one's views while enjoying the insulation of one-way communication. Yes, the alternatives-consequences approach lets us work directly with the people, but we have to follow the rules. We have to distinguish among education, science and politics and relate these to policy roles we academics play.

### **Education ≠ Science ≠ Politics**

#### **Social Functions of Education, Science and Politics**

That education, science and politics have different social functions is no revelation, but it is worth taking a few moments to consider how these differences affect what we can do with public policy. Education is *human* development. Science (research) is *information* development. Politics is *policy* development. In the heat of public policy education, they are alloyed so they may appear as one. But they differ in purpose and methods so we need to compare them.

**Education** requires the interaction of four elements: learners, leaders, content and context (Liles, et al., pp. 7-12). Learners are our students; in extension they come voluntarily. Leaders are teachers, or specialists and agents. Content is the information, concepts and values taught. Context refers to the learning environment—a classroom, a field, wherever education takes place. Each element is essential but *interaction* is the key word. Interaction is necessary for human development—no interaction, no education (House, 1990a, pp. 1-3).

The context for all extension education is informal. But, when the subject is a public policy issue, the context is also political and therefore controversial. Public policy education is merely education that is specialized to educate in a context that is political. It gives us a chance to deal with controversy without being controversial.

**Science** tries to replace myth with fact. Science develops knowledge by employing logic, reasoning, observation, and experimentation to test hypotheses and develop theories. Objectivity, essential to science, relies on the scientific method to provide a consistent logic.

Research-based information provides most of the content for extension education, but it is important to recognize that education is not an application of, or even an extension of, the scientific method. Science and education are two different functions relying on differ-

ent methods. Scientists often ignore this fact by presenting information about only one alternative.

The function of **politics** is to shape policy. At its best, it is communication to develop agreement. At its worst, it is a commendable alternative to war and insurrection. Politics has a bad image even though it is called the art of compromise. It includes negotiation and compromise among private parties but we usually associate politics with the shaping and implementation of public policy.

If there is one thing in this world that is predictable, it is that people who are doing politics will call it education. They are just trying to put a pretty mask on persuasion or propaganda. Extension educators are not immune to this behavior; in fact, much of it is intentional. When we preach instead of teach, we are engaging in politics.

What is the purpose of public policy education? Larry Libby expressed it accurately at this conference last year: "Our goal is to facilitate orderly change, minimize conflict, and generally inform people. It is not our goal to preserve farmland, preserve farmers, preserve wetlands, increase the supply of cheap housing or expand the tax base. We may vote on these issues at some point, but continued credibility as analysts and educators requires that we merely catalyze a decision process" (Libby, pp. 107-8).

### **Policy Roles Played by Academics**

Do all academics want to be public policy educators? Obviously not. Those who choose to be involved with public policy serve society in very different ways.

Most academics who deal with policy are *policy analysts*: the information they supply helps justify the existence of both research and extension faculty. Many policy analysts are also *policy advisors*: they inform policymakers directly and privately as to the findings from policy analysis. Some are *policy activists*: representative government depends on the participation of active citizens, including educators. A few are also *policymakers*: they are in policy leadership roles because they can bring resources to bear on a common problem. Finally, there are public *policy educators*: they try to increase public understanding of public policies and problems.

What lessons can we learn from recognizing these roles? There are at least three:

1. Know your role's objectives (and limitations) and use appropriate methods skillfully. I have heard Clemson President Max Lennon encourage educators to insure their programs include academic content so they will continue to be essential. Likewise, policy analysts who provide lots of content often fail to

create the interaction necessary to learning. Policy advisors who think their role is temporary and safe often find themselves politicized. Likewise, policy activists will make political friends—and enemies. Policy educators have to be able to use research, be effective teachers and work in a political context.

2. Recognize the risks of role switching. You cannot expect someone you opposed on a political issue to believe you only have their best interests at heart when you try to be her teacher (Felts-Grabarski).
3. Recognize each role's contribution to our system of government, especially the role of policy educator.

### **Objectivity is Essential**

Public policy education is a “constrained opportunity.” The philosophy of the alternatives-consequences approach limits the educator by encouraging a rational, problem-solving approach; requiring equal recognition of alternatives and the people involved; and letting the people decide without the wisdom of your judgment. There is a presumption herein that your values are neither inferior nor superior to others' values. One can only conclude that objectivity is not a choice, that it is essential to success. Without objectivity, the only sources of credibility are our titles, our university's reputation, our director's image of us, our good looks, and our charisma. I have had to rely on objectivity.

Is objectivity possible? Of course it is possible, if you are willing to view it as a goal to reach for rather than an absolute condition. Academics love to debate the limits of science, that logical positivism is passe, and that research priorities are distorted by the dominant culture, funding sources and politics. I do not argue that science is perfect, just that science is useful *if* it is objectively done. Scientists rely on the scientific method. They gain credibility from it. They gain confidence in their findings when they know they have been objective in their pursuit of the truth.

Extension educators rely on the researchers to be objective so that our research-based information is credible. However, public policy educators also must have “objectivity in education.” *Just as researchers rely on the scientific method, public policy educators rely on the alternatives-consequences approach. We gain credibility from it. Citizens' confidence in us depends directly on their perception that we have been objective in education.*

Objectivity in science is not the same as objectivity in public policy education. Objectivity is essential to both but one does not substitute for the other. Just as it is difficult to achieve objectivity in science it is difficult to achieve objectivity in education.

## Conclusions

- The alternatives-consequences approach to public policy education lets us deal with controversy without being controversial.
- Be honest about your role. If you want to do politics, don't call it public policy education.
- You cannot be credible if you are not objective, both in research and education.
- Leadership development, issue programming, mediation, communications, rural economic development and public policy education compliment one another, but they do not replace the need for the alternatives-consequences approach.
- Objectivity in education empowers us to increase people's understanding of public problems and policies.

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