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Step-by-step approaches to public issues education

chapter 2

Grappling with controversial public issues can be a complex process. Everyone would like to know: How far have we come? Where are we now? And when will we “get there”?

Anyone who begins to think of himself or herself as a public issues educator will probably be called upon to answer such questions. Having a step-by-step model of public issues education to present and discuss makes it easier to:

- Help participants develop a shared understanding of the process in which they are involved. This can lead to better teamwork, more information sharing, and the likelihood of working through differences. (Simply informing people about the process would be a useful contribution in itself.)
- Give people a fresh understanding of the process. This could help them to move past sticking points. For example, if people think the situation is strictly “win or lose,” the possibility of collaborative conflict resolution may change their opinion. If some people believe their voices don’t matter, a

sequence incorporating widespread public involvement may give them the opportunity to share their ideas.

Being clear about the sequence of steps can be valuable to the educator as well as the participants. An understanding of the process can help answer questions like these:

- What types of educational activities would be appropriate at each stage of the process?
- How can I explain educational goals, plans and expected results to others?
- How can I articulate a vision of public issues education that others can understand and accept?

Answering these questions would be simpler if there were one accurate or official way to describe the process for addressing issues—but each issue is different. Also, there are various conceptual frameworks, or “models” of the process, which give us a different view or understanding. Some sequences are familiar; for example, how a bill becomes a law. Some are less widely known: how a government regulation is proposed and reviewed. Some we use all the time with rarely a thought: how to think through a practical problem and come up with some novel solutions.

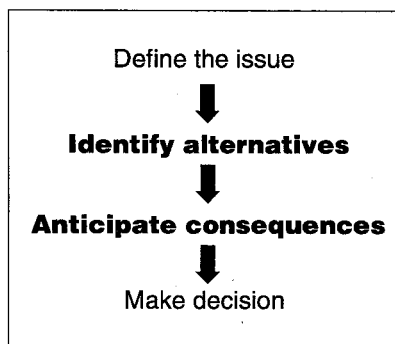
The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of some models—step-by-step sequences—that have proven useful for describing the process of addressing issues. Most of them are also useful for guiding the process.

Key points from some of the models will be explained more fully in later sections of this document. The list of references and resources can help you find more detailed information about each of the models. But the purpose of this section is not to make anyone an expert on the models; instead, it is to make the point that a public issues educator needs clarity about the process, which can take the form of a model, and to provide some ideas that may help you choose a suitable model or develop your own.

Being clear about the sequence of steps can be valuable to the educator as well as the participants.

The models

Alternatives and consequences⁵

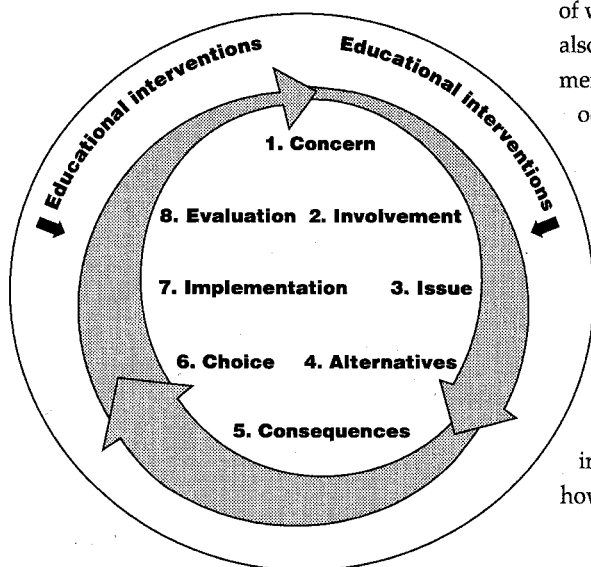


The Alternatives and Consequences model stresses the middle stages of the issue resolution process: clarifying options and anticipating the impacts of each. This model assumes that an issue has been defined and focuses on the central elements of a thoughtful choice. This focus on the key concepts of identifying alternatives and solutions, then analyzing the consequences—the “what-ifs”—of each alternative, is so important that the same steps can be found in nearly all other models as well.

An important feature of the Alternatives and Consequences model is that it avoids favoritism toward any one alternative. Although it is possible to use this model to facilitate discussion in which participants themselves identify and ana-

lyze the alternatives and consequences, the model has more often been used as an aid for organizing experts’ presentations about public issues. Experts in such a role need to spend a great deal of time with colleagues and other knowledgeable people to pinpoint the analytical heart of an issue. Then they need to incorporate that insight into their educational approach in ways that avoid divisiveness. Some people believe that the educator must know more about the issue than anyone else to lead a discussion, while others believe that a good facilitator can call in experts and feed them questions to bring out the points needed for group discussion and educated decision making.

Issue evolution/educational intervention⁶

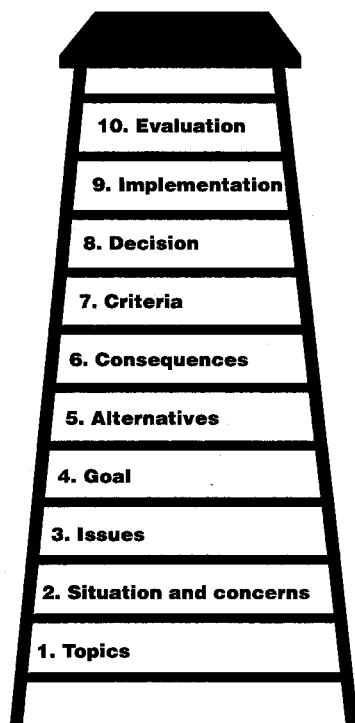


This model consists of eight stages or steps; alternatives and consequences are the middle two. Earlier stages include the emergence of a problem or concern out of which the issue develops. This model also clarifies the decision making, implementation and evaluation stages that occur. (The next two models highlight similar stages.)

The stages before “alternatives” and after “consequences” offer additional roles for the educator—in fact, a key feature of this model is the possible roles it suggests. The model’s “educational intervention” aspect is represented as an outer circle, centered around the eight-step inner circle. The inner circle describes how public issues evolve “in the real

world.” The outer circle describes ways that education can be introduced into each step of the process. The model assumes that an educator can determine an issue’s stage; then design and implement educational interventions appropriate for that stage. For example, in Stage 1, educators may help people understand a problematic situation. In Stage 2, they might help identify decision makers and affected parties and get them involved. In Stage 3, they might help participants clarify their goals and understand the conflicting goals of other participants.

The Ladder⁷



The Ladder model, created by public issues educators in California, is distinguished primarily by its emphasis on a step-by-step process of group discussion among people with diverse perspectives. In sharp contrast to Alternatives and Consequences (as it is often implemented), the Ladder model casts the educator as facilitator and allows participants to control the process, including identifying issues, alternatives, consequences, etc. The concept of a ladder is important: Like a ladder, the model can take a group up or down an issue, across an abyss of misunderstanding, or it can be collapsed into a few sections and converted to a variety of steps, depending upon the group's capabilities.

Use of the Ladder requires someone with experience in educational facilitation. Sensitive, skillful facilitation can help to create and maintain a forum in which constructive interaction, rather than polarization, takes place. The task is not to provide answers, but to ask the right questions so that the group moves

ahead. For example, one facilitation technique is to back off when things get too contentious and ask the group members what they would do if they were in the educator's position. The Ladder is intended to produce free-wheeling but structured meetings in which all participants feel empowered and free to say what they feel. It will take the group to a point of resolution, the specifics of which may not be known or predictable at the first one or two meetings.

Key points of the Ladder include:

- Identifying criteria for weighing alternative chores which satisfy all participants.
- Repeating the alternatives and consequences analysis for implementation strategies and tactics, since each may have different chances of success.
- Hooking final evaluation to the initial concerns which gave rise to the issue.

Discovery and analysis⁸



The Discovery and Analysis model combines steps from several other models. Its name reflects the emphasis this model puts on two modes of thinking about issues: expansive, "discovery" thinking and systematic, critical analysis. This model intentionally draws upon several different meanings of the word "discovery":

- sharing of information previously known only to some of the parties (as in the legal profession's use of the word);
- awareness of new or previously unknown information (as in "scientific discovery");

- the experience of new perspectives, environments, or experiences (as in the "discoveries" of explorers); and
- participation in generating new knowledge as well as learning existing facts (as in "discovery learning").

Analysis, in this model, includes the systematic, rational analysis of information about current situations, trends, problems, alternative solutions, and likely consequences of different alternatives.

SHAPES⁹

Project name: _____		
EVENTS >	1	2...
Prior situation		
Situation		
Initiating set		
Legitimizers		
Diffusion set		
Define needs		
Commitment		
Goals		
Means		
Plan		
Resources		
Launching		
Action		
Evaluation		
Event codes		
1 = planner reviews situation		
2 = information assembled, etc.		
Actor codes		
A = county planner		
B = county commissioners, etc.		

The SHAPES model takes the form of a matrix. Steps in the process are listed in rows; project events which happen over time are listed in columns. (Events includes items such as "planner becomes acquainted with the county," "existing information assembled," "data updated," "initial meeting with community residents," "set priorities," "establish commitments," etc.) In each cell of the matrix, where a row (step) intersects a particular column (event), the key participants in the event and the outcome of the event are summarized.

Any list of steps could be used for the row labels, but the steps actually identified in the SHAPES model place greater emphasis than the other models on helping participants take action on agreed-upon goals, and relatively less emphasis on working out agreement in areas of conflict. Consequently, there are more steps that deal with forming and legitimizing the group, getting a commitment to act,

and working out detailed implementation plans. There is correspondingly less emphasis on defining the issues and on weighing the consequences and deciding among competing alternatives.

The SHAPES model was developed when an Extension educator wanted a more descriptive historical record of what he and his group were doing. He displayed the model as a "group memory" on large sheets of paper tacked to the walls—a visual record of what had happened, what was currently going on, and what might still happen. Used in this way, the model possesses great appeal. Since a highly visible record is provided, the model readily shows the ups and downs that any group process takes over time, including the critical incidents which bring about key accomplishments. It also identifies people who help or hinder the process.

Interest-based problem solving¹⁰

PRE-NEGOTIATION PHASE

1. Getting started
2. Representation
3. Ground rules and agenda
4. Problem definition
5. Joint fact-finding

NEGOTIATION PHASE

8. Criteria development
7. Generating alternatives
8. Evaluation and creating agreements
9. Binding the parties to the agreements
10. Producing a written agreement
11. Ratification

IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

12. Linking information agreements to formal decision making
13. Monitoring implementation

The Interest-Based Problem Solving model—like other dispute resolution models—contains many of the same steps as models previously discussed. It differs, however, in placing more emphasis on the special difficulties of communicating and making decisions in the presence of heightened conflict and emotion.

The goal of this model is to help key stakeholders work out mutually acceptable solutions. The steps include establishing ground rules, joint fact-finding, packaging agreements, and securing commitment and ratification of agreements from each party.

The Interest-Based Problem Solving model is designed to help find solutions in situations of serious conflict and controversy. It strives for balance between the parties' personal needs, their interpersonal relationships, and the results of the

process. Building trust and credibility through responsive facilitation techniques is crucial. Facilitation is provided to maximize group trust and compatibility even though many different (and often opposing) interests are at the table. The focus is on problem solving based on mutual understanding of the various participants' interests, as opposed to arguments over each participant's positions or preferred solutions. The model incorporates problem solving with significant attention to the people in the group, their needs, and the group's needs, as well as a commitment to resolving the conflictual issue.

National Issues Forums¹¹

KEY FEATURES

Prepare leaders
Printed materials—issue book
Ground rules
Discussion—working through
Personal reflection

The National Issues Forums model emphasizes steps that are similar to Alternatives and Consequences and Interest-Based Problem Solving, even though the terminology is different. The National Issues Forums are also geared toward exploring alternatives, but in this approach, the intended participants are ordinary citizens who don't necessarily have an official policy making role or even a direct personal stake in the issue. The National Issues Forums model especially emphasizes preparation of discussion leaders, agreement on ground rules, and "closing"—a step that asks participants to reflect on what they've come up with that is different from the usual positions taken on public issues.

The National Issues Forums model takes the form of a town meeting and engages the public in deliberation about an issue. Written materials, called "issue books," provide background information

and outline three or four major options. The forums are discussions led by trained facilitators; the goal is to get people to move from initial opinions to more thoughtful judgments which incorporate an understanding of others' viewpoints. The model emphasizes that making choices is difficult and illustrates this by having the group members work through their own conflicting emotions about the trade-offs that will have to be made to resolve the issue. Participants are expected to find themselves struggling with trade-offs between things they hold dear and their increased understanding and acceptance of the legitimacy of others' points of view. The program ends with a shared understanding of the problem and a focus on the competing values that make the issue hard to decide. The group considers the consequences of making a choice and leaves with an awareness of what is still unresolved.

Citizen politics¹²

Creating a Public Space

1. Choose a public problem
2. Invite diverse players
3. Define conceptual framework of a public space
4. Establish knowledge base
5. Demonstrate relationship between diverse interests and problem
6. Redefine problem
7. Develop strategies for problem-solving
8. Clarify roles, responsibilities
9. Build relationships among diverse interests
10. Evaluate

The primary goal of the citizen politics model is to "bring the public back into politics" by counteracting the dominant role played by politicians and professional policymakers. The idea is to make politics something in which the public participates. The model is built around several key concepts:

- the idea of a "public world" that is different from people's private lives, but equally important;
- "self interest" as a legitimate starting point for seeking solutions to shared problems;
- "diversity" as a source of relevant experience and knowledge; and
- "power" as something that can be created by building relationships. The citizen politics model does not provide one definitive step-by-step process.

In practice, emphasis is usually placed on the early stages of the policy making process, where problems are defined, people understand how they are affected, and key players are identified and brought into the process. Defining problems from multiple perspectives involves bringing diverse interests to the table, eliciting self-interests through storytelling, and building a mission statement that reflects the varied interests of the group. Political analysis and mapping are used to identify the interests surrounding a problem and the power relationships through which problems can be solved. Participants are often those normally uninvolved in public life (young people, the elderly, the poor, racial and ethnic minorities). These groups receive help in building relationships with other key players who already work together redefining and solving problems.

A brief guide to the models

Even if no single model fits your situation, each has its particular strengths. Following is a brief overview of important features from the models that may help you develop your own.

- **Balances analysis of alternatives and consequences:** highlighted by Alternatives and Consequences. Included in Issue Evolution, Ladder, Discovery and Analysis, Issue-based Problem Solving, and National Issues Forums.
- **Emphasizes needed knowledge and analysis:** Alternatives and Consequences
- **Promotes comprehensive list of steps:** highlighted by Issue Evolution. Also a feature of Ladder, Discovery and Analysis, SHAPES, and Issue-Based Problem Solving.
- **Links policy making steps and educational intervention:** highlighted by Issue Evolution.
- **Provides interactive process for leading a diverse group through all the steps:** highlighted by Ladder; also a feature of Issue-based Problem Solving.
- **Highlights interplay between creative and analytical thinking:** Discovery and Analysis.
- **Provides prominent visual display of the process:** highlighted by SHAPES.
- **Highlights links between theoretical process and steps actually taken in a real situation:** SHAPES.
- **Tools for confronting conflict constructively:** highlighted by Issue-based Problem Solving (focus on interests and trust building); also a feature of National Issues Forums ("working through" an issue) and Citizen Politics (emphasis on identifying and respecting self-interests).
- **Emphasis on involving citizens not normally active in policy making:** highlighted by National Issues Forums and Citizen Politics.
- **Stresses links between citizens and policy makers:** highlighted by Citizen Politics.
- **Applies an alternatives and consequences analysis to choices about implementation steps:** highlighted by Ladder model.

Essential elements

For any particular public issues education project, it may be that one of the models will provide a good fit for describing and guiding the process. Or it may be that no single existing model describes the issue-sequence in which your community is involved. If so, you may need to borrow something from one model, something else from another, and invent some new elements as well.

Even if your task is to choose one of the existing models—but especially if you need to devise a new one—it may help to have a checklist of essential elements.

1. Multiple perspectives need to be included.

Matters of public concern become issues because they give rise to controversy. Different points of view and different interests exist. Rarely will helping a single individual or interest-group formulate its position on an issue move things closer to a solution. What is usually needed is a process that brings the diverse viewpoints into some type of interaction that can lead to new understandings and new solutions.

2. A structured process is useful.

A step-by-step sequence that moves from a problem situation toward a mutually acceptable solution is desirable. Such a sequence or structure provides a shared understanding of what is going on and what activities are appropriate. The sequence or structure will often convey the message that different viewpoints need to be understood and that agreements need to be worked out.

3. Ground rules are needed.

It can help for the group to generate a set of ground rules; for example, respecting others' points of view. The framework provided by a step-by-step sequence can serve as the basis and rationale for the ground rules.

4. Broader understandings are required.

To reach shared understandings, people may need to move beyond narrow personal perspectives. This happens through informational presentations and dialogue, both of which require facilitation that encourages good listening and an open-minded attitude.

5. A shared information base is crucial.

Science-based facts and understandings are an important component of the shared perspective. Other stakeholders' values, experience and "local knowledge" are also an essential component of the "big picture."

6. Shared goals can drive the process.

Participants' shared interests or compatible goals can provide a basis for mutual learning and collaborative problem solving. At the very least, people need to acknowledge that there are other parties in a controversy who have different goals or interests which are valid and legitimate. No one—facilitators or other participants—should oversimplify such differences in the name of finding shared goals.

7. Mutually acceptable solutions are worth seeking.

Even when "win-win" solutions aren't readily apparent, the most significant contribution is often to generate alternatives and assess their consequences with an eye to finding possible solutions with which everyone will be content. This may be a matter of creativity and inventiveness, tinkering with the details, or developing packages of solutions that are satisfactory for all. It requires looking at consequences not just from one's own perspective, but from the viewpoint of other parties as well.

8. The process is ongoing.

A decision is not an end point. Often, it is the beginning of a real-world "experiment" to see whether the chosen course will achieve the expected results—whether it will resolve the issue in a mutually acceptable way. Most public decisions have unanticipated consequences. Some work. Some don't. Learning why or why not may be the most valuable piece of education of all. It goes beyond individual learning; it is learning at the community or societal level.

9. The process itself deserves evaluation.

How well did the process work? Would it have worked better with some modifications? Or is there another process (model) that would have worked better? This also is an important part of the learning which results from a sequence of public issues education and issue resolution. To the extent that a clear, step-by-step process has been agreed upon and tried, such a process evaluation will be easier and more instructive.

