Designing educational programs on public issues

chapter 3

Designing your educational program around a public issue involves three key steps:

1. focusing on an issue: anticipating, selecting and framing it
2. identifying and recruiting participants for the educational program
3. selecting appropriate educational delivery methods.

Each of these steps is explained more fully in the sections that follow.

Choosing an issue

Anticipating issues

Studying early information about emerging issues gives you maximum time to:

- decide whether to develop an educational program
- frame the issue in a way that lends itself to education and dialogue
- develop educational plans and materials
- be ready for "teachable moments" that may occur.

Time spent anticipating issues pays off by giving you time to do some advance planning. But opportunities for public issues education sometimes emerge during the course of other work. Sometimes it's more accurate to say that public issues erupt when controversy occurs unexpectedly.[13] Even in those cases, prior work anticipating issues and clarifying educational priorities helps.

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Public issues educators are not the only ones interested in developing a process for anticipating issues. In every organization, there are a number of issues that are crucial to the organization's future. A growing number recognize this and conduct "environmental scanning" to obtain maximum lead time to deal with emerging threats or opportunities. Topics vary from one organization to another. For example, a corporation may track consumers' safety concerns, employees' benefit preferences, or a community's environmental issues.

The process can vary as well. An agricultural commodity association might develop an in-house environmental scanning capacity, or enter into a contract with a research institute or consulting firm. The process can be simple and still work; for example, a small group of people can agree to review publications and conduct a regular brown-bag discussion group.

As a public issues educator, you should anticipate issues that will provide the focus for educational programming. You should also be aware that others will use this information differently. For example, corporations will feed it into their strategic planning process. Certain corporations anticipate issues as the first step in "issues management." Other steps include research, prioritizing issues and selecting those that need action, developing alternative courses of action, and deciding what action to take.[14]

Issues management encompasses a range of possible actions. For example, Johnson & Johnson allied itself with consumer concerns in its handling of the Tylenol poisonings. Mobil Oil promotes a particular political viewpoint in its op-ed advertisements on energy policy, and the insurance industry occasionally aligns itself with consumer groups to promote automobile safety regulations. Interest groups, such as environmental organizations, are also increasingly savvy about identifying issues and trends. By their statements or actions, organizations attempt to influence how the public understands or frames issues, and the connection it makes between the organization and the issue.

A public issues educator should not expect to "manage issues" in the same way that issues management practitioners do; the goal of public issues education is not to produce decisions that benefit a particular organization. (Of course, good public education programs on well-chosen issues will reflect positively on the organizations that conduct them, and may attract political and financial support.) But the decisions that are made about those issues are for others—not educators—to decide. For educators, the role of issue tracking is to help select and frame issues in ways that enhance the likelihood of effective, democratic education.

An issue-scanning process can be guided by—and can refine and expand—a category scheme of issues relevant to a particular organization. Below is a sample.

A category scheme for issues

category: related issue areas

world: global economy, international relations

society: health, education, media, family, consumer preferences, racial & ethnic diversity

economy: economic conditions, trade, fiscal policy, new technologies

government: legislative and regulatory priorities, taxation and spending

natural environment: protection problems and priorities, resources

Recognizing sensitive issues

A reputation for fairness, balance and credibility is crucial to your success as a public issues educator. If you or your organization fail to anticipate an issue's sensitive nature, observers may detect a real or imagined bias which can damage your neutral stance.

Scenario A: A nutritionist describes new government guidelines on fat consumption and the food pyramid which recommends daily portions of meats, grains, leafy vegetables, etc. A cattle rancher in the audience protests that the nutritionist, her organization and nutritionists everywhere are out to get the cattle industry, and that the food pyramid attacks a valuable nutritional source without scientific justification.

Scenario B: While making a presentation on woodlot management, a forester implies that wetlands regulations are too severe and landowners may ignore some of them. An environmental organization's newsletter publishes a summary with a negative commentary about the forester and the agency for which he works.

How can you avoid these problems? Trying to anticipate issues helps by providing early warning of volatile subjects. A number of issues are predictably controversial (see sidebar). But attention to two key points can help you avoid the pitfalls of sensitive issues:

1. Always consider that an issue looks different to different "stakeholders." Ask yourself: "Who else cares about this issue?" and "What's their point of view on it?"
2. Remember that, as a public issues educator, your job is to help various interests understand each other. The public issue educator's reputation for fairness, balance and respect for all points of view is crucial to success. Always act in ways that maintain the respect and credibility warranted by your role as a public issues educator.

In summary:

- Identify issues in the early stages of their evolution.
- Involve program participants in identifying the issue(s) that matter to them.
- Explicitly note different perceptions about the issue to avoid being seen as an advocate for a particular outcome or a particular group.

Anticipating controversy[15]

Any of the following characteristics provide you with a clue that an issue may be especially heated and controversial:

Quality of life, standard of living

☐ People believe their livelihood or standard of living are threatened.

Personal health and safety

☐ There is a real or perceived health risk.

☐ There is a risk of bodily injury or harm.

Environment: There is a risk to the environment which may threaten

☐ human health

☐ animals

☐ natural resources or scenic areas

Justice and equal opportunity

☐ People's sense of fairness or justice is violated.

☐ Opportunities are being denied to a segment of the population.

Party politics

☐ The two major political parties have different perspectives on the issue.

Government role

☐ There is a question of more government vs. less.

☐ There is a question about how many tax dollars to spend.

☐ There are questions about whether government "solutions" are impinging on individual rights and freedoms.

☐ Multiple government agencies are involved, and there is real or perceived conflict among their missions.

Notes on specific potential sources of controversy for your issue:

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

Selecting an issue

To make a significant contribution, public issues education programs must keep their focus over a period of time. More often than not, programs don't achieve the intensity of focus required to affect complex issues.[16] It is likely that you will be able to take on only one public issue at a time, so selecting one is an important commitment.

A number of different criteria can be used to select issues. Among them:

- *Importance to the general public:* What is the intensity of concern among ordinary citizens (as identified, for example, through surveys or focus group interviews)? What is its priority in relation to other issues? Perhaps you can strike a balance in the issues you address between those important to policy makers and those of high priority to ordinary citizens.
- *Importance to policy makers:* This may be an important criterion, especially if the policy makers provide funding for the educators' programs. But the issues on policy makers' agendas are not always the most important or interesting issues for other groups or for the public at large.
- *Importance to specific interests:* How important is the issue to various demographic, interest, or clientele groups? If you select an issue important to a particular group, will you be tempted to cater to one point of view? Can you justify working with specific groups and not extend the same assistance to all others?

- *Fit:* How well does the issue fit with your own and your organization's areas of concern or expertise? Can you conduct a balanced educational program on these topics? Are you or your organization too closely identified with a particular point of view?
- *Human resources:* Do you have access to the technical expertise that is needed? (This is often less of an issue than it seems; expertise can be obtained from many sources.)
- *Timing:* Is it too late to make a positive contribution through education? Or too early—because there is not yet enough interest in the issue?

Your choice of issues will have implications for your organization. The type of issue selected will always make some kind of statement about you and your organization. That statement might be:

- Here is an organization that helps people address natural resource issues (or food system issues, or youth and family issues, or other specific categories).
- Here is an organization that helps people address whatever issues they care about most.
- Here is an organization that helps people with leadership skills, issue analysis, creative thinking, collaboration and negotiation. It works through tough issues with people who hold different points of view.

People will try to figure out how public issues education fits with the organization's broader purpose. The choice of issues covered in educational programs will clarify or complicate their understanding of your organization's mission.

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In summary:

- Many issues exist at the same time, and they compete for people's time.
- Citizens engage themselves in issues they perceive will affect the quality of their lives.
- Personal experience is a stronger motivation for involvement than abstract national data.
- Perceived injustice or personal costs may motivate some people, while altruistic concerns, including the opportunity for volunteer efforts, might engage others.

Framing the question

One of the main benefits of getting an early start on an emerging issue is the opportunity to participate in framing the question—influencing the way other players and the broader public understand the issue. Research into creativity and problem solving shows that the way the question is posed is a key factor in determining the types and numbers of solutions that will ultimately be developed.

The educator will not be alone in trying to frame issues: the policy making process has been described as a "symbolic contest over which interpretations [of an issue] will prevail."[17] If BST, the hormone that increases milk yields, is understood as a naturally-occurring substance that increases yields and may reduce consumer prices, it is perceived very differently than if it is understood as unnatural tinkering with a natural process by a large profit-oriented company.

The public's understanding of an issue is often shaped by the news media. The media, in turn, are heavily influenced by the interpretation of issues from public officials, experts and other regularly-used news sources. Protest groups or other organizations with alternative or challenging points of view generally try to develop and publicize their own competing frames for issues they care about. However, their success is often limited by poor access to the news media or by failing to obtain serious, respectful coverage.

For you as the public issues educator, the objective should be to frame the question in a way that lends itself to education and discourse. This usually means stating the issue as a question (or questions) that all parties find acceptable and worthy of consideration. Consider the examples[18] in the sidebar on the next page.

Examples: Framing the question[19]

"Ag and wIdlife coexistence"

When cotton growers and environmentalists sat down to talk in Cameron County, Texas, they named their committee the Ag and Wildlife Coexistence Committee. This name carried an implicit framing of the question: Can agriculture and wildlife interests coexist successfully in the county? Initially it appeared that the measures needed to protect an endangered falcon and the pesticides needed to grow cotton were incompatible. The wording was acceptable to all the participants because it didn't reflect a bias in favor of one viewpoint.

From "hunger" to "food security"

In recent years, many people concerned about hunger in the United States have shifted their focus to "food security." This phrase encompasses hunger and malnutrition, usually linked to low family income; it also includes food access problems related to geographic location. It is a rewording that clarifies why a broader audience has a stake in the issue.

"Communities for child safety"

This phrase became the title of a project sponsored by 4-H, the National 4-H Council and other partners. It reflects a fresh way of looking at two old problems: accidental injury and child abuse. Combining the two problems has made it safer for people to come forward and talk about their concerns and possible solutions. As a separate topic, child abuse was especially sensitive and difficult. The greatest strength of this new language, however, is that it generates positive energy by emphasizing a constructive point of view: What can communities do to create a safe environment for their children?

County food and Ag committees

This committee name implies a broad problem area—broad enough to let specific committees identify the issues they believe are most important. Extension's Northeast Network for Food, Health and Agriculture project worked with such committees on issues ranging from local farmers' markets to hunger to agricultural regulations.

Tips for framing issues

- Involve program participants in exploring the nature of the problem and framing the question.
- World events may affect a specific community, but important societal or global issues may be overlooked or even denied by a particular community unless data clearly demonstrate how the problem manifests itself locally.
- The issue must capture stakeholder interest. Help participants to articulate the ways that an issue touches their lives.

Identifying and recruiting participants

Anyone taking on the responsibilities of a public issues educator will need to think about who the potential learners are and how to recruit them. Identifying stakeholders is a standard part of planning for public involvement or alternative dispute resolution. Stakeholders are the people who hold a stake—have an interest—in the issue at hand.

For some issues, most or all of the stakeholders will be visibly involved. If it is early in an issue's evolution, you may need to pay special attention to identifying stakeholders. You can usually do this by identifying categories, then organizations or individuals within each category. The category list varies according to the issue.

The goal in public issues education should be to understand and take into account all the perspectives on an issue.

Categories of stakeholders[20]

- neighborhood organizations
- interest groups
- government (all levels)
- public agencies
- private agencies
- religious institutions
- educational institutions
- professional associations
- foundations
- corporations
- private sector associations

Other categories are suggested by:

- The "Power Clusters" model of public policy making,[21] which suggests that policies are shaped by interaction among:
  - —administrative agencies
  - —elected officials
  - —interest groups
  - —professional experts
  - —attentive public
  - —latent public
- The "Kings and Kingmakers" model,[22] which divides the community into:
  - —"kingmakers," who exercise influence behind the scenes
  - —"kings," the visible elected and appointed decision makers
  - —active citizens
  - —interested citizens
  - —uninvolved citizens
- The "Cornell Planning Matrix,"[23] which recommends identifying those affected by an issue at each of the following levels:
  - —public policy makers
  - —groups and organizations—agencies, business firms, interest groups, etc.
  - —individuals and families (whether organized or not)

Other ways to build the list of stake holders:

- Review news coverage of the issue.
- Brainstorm with a group of knowledgeable individuals.
- Interview people involved, asking them to identify additional stakeholders.

People often find it easiest to think of stakeholders with viewpoints similar to their own. Here are some questions to help you generate additional names:

Q: Who are the decision makers? Who will probably be required to make decisions before the issue can be resolved?

Q: Who can obstruct a decision? From whom might you expect opposition?

It may be useful to show some people your initial list of key organizations, categories and individuals; then ask them to add to it.

Involving the stakeholders

Do the learners in a public issues education program need to include stakeholders on all sides of an issue?

Ideally, the answer is "yes." The goal in public issues education should be to understand and take into account all the perspectives on an issue. The most effective way to ensure that all viewpoints are covered is to have someone physically represent each one at discussions and other activities.

Here are some reasons why all points of view need to be included (or at least understood):

- Democratic policy making is based on the assumption that all parties to an issue have a right to participate and present their views for legitimate consideration.
- Involving everyone is perceived as the fair thing to do, and contributes to fair decision making. (Interviews with the public suggest that fairness is widely considered an important standard. People believe that public decisions should be fair—even, in many cases, if they personally must give something up. Example: a tavern owner who favors raising the legal drinking age.)

- Decisions may be blocked by those whose views were not considered.
- When decisions are made, they may be attacked, reversed or undermined by unrepresented factions. Omitted parties may resort to legal action, which is costly and time-consuming.
- Implementing the decisions may be hampered because of continuing opposition and noncompliance on the part of those who were left out of the process.

Consider using these arguments if some stakeholders don't want to participate—and especially if they don't want other stakeholders to participate.

Despite the preference for programs with multiple stakeholders, meaningful and useful educational programs *can* be conducted for single groups. Here are some tips for successful programming with only one interest—or with one group at a time:

- Don't become an advocate for any group. Client-focused education starts with a particular clientele group an educator works with or cares about. In the extreme, client-focused programming may mean doing whatever a particular group needs or wants to fulfill its particular interests. An educator who sympathizes with one group to the point of simply reinforcing its preconceptions is unlikely to help anyone, including the client group.
- Stay "issue-focused."[24] Always be aware of multiple perspectives on an issue.
- Work to increase understanding of the issue, including other parties' viewpoints. Even if a group's goal is to promote only its own welfare, it may be able to do so more effectively if its members understand how the issues they care about are viewed by decision makers and opponents.

It isn't always possible to involve people from all sides of an issue in educational programs. Not everyone will participate willingly, or be easily recruited. Some will be skeptical of governmental processes or "big business" and reluctant to participate in a process that may involve collaborating with those sectors. Some may be too busy (elected officials, for example), or may consider themselves too important to take the time required to learn or work on collaborative solutions.

Other stakeholders may feel disempowered or unwelcome in a learning or problem solving process. Their self-image, confidence, or perceptions of others' attitudes toward them may hamper their involvement. Because these factors cut unequally across demographic variables such as race, class and educational background, special efforts may be necessary to ensure that all interests affected by an issue are represented.

Below are some suggestions to help you recruit participants.

- Remember that participation in public issues often depends on people's realization that they (or things or people they care about) are affected by an issue; on their perception that they are affected in ways that are not "right" or "fair"; and on a sense of hopefulness that something can be done. Anything an educator can do to encourage these perceptions may stimulate involvement.
- Consider that the actual number of participants in public issues education may be less important than their "representativeness." Well-attended educational events that omit relevant perspectives on the issues may not be nearly as valuable as those with fewer participants, but with all points of view represented. The idea is that even people who are not physically involved should be able to see that their perspectives were included in the discussion.
- Take the trouble to extend invitations to people whose points of view need to be included. It may not be sufficient to simply ensure that educational events are "open to everyone." Those who do not participate will neither hear nor be heard by those who do, and those who do participate will have an incomplete picture of the situation. Therefore, extending invitations is worth the time and energy. Beg, plead, cajole, twist arms—whatever you feel you can do. Explain, as often as you must, the reasons why all points of view need to be included.
- If representatives of particular viewpoints cannot be persuaded to participate, look for other ways to bring an understanding of their viewpoints to participants. If local business people cannot participate, find someone who is knowledgeable about their situation and who can represent the business community's interests and values to other participants. (Another possibility: Have some of the participants interview business people and report to the group at a future meeting.)

Designing educational programs

The goal of public issues education is to help an issue's stakeholders move forward to a satisfactory resolution of the issue. Key questions you can ask include:

- What do the participants need to learn? Specifically, who needs to learn what?
- What educational delivery methods will best encourage and facilitate learning?

Learners may need factual information, process assistance, or both.

Who needs to learn what?

In public issues education, learning needs and objectives depend in part on the stage of the policy making process. The list below can be used as a learning needs checklist. Add questions if necessary; then use checkmarks to indicate "yes."

- ☐ Do some or all of the stakeholders need a clearer understanding of the problem, its causes, and its implications for different groups?
- ☐ Do more stakeholders need to become involved through increased awareness and motivation?
- ☐ Do one or more groups of stakeholders need to clarify their interests and set goals?
- ☐ Do stakeholders need more understanding of each other's situations, values and interests?
- ☐ Is help needed to identify or create alternatives or to analyze consequences?
- ☐ Do stakeholders need a better understanding of how decisions are made, and by whom?
- ☐ Is help needed in implementing decisions or evaluating outcomes?

Learners may need factual information, process assistance, or both. Information can be provided by experts, shared among the participants, or gathered by participants through their own research. Process assistance can include help in getting involved in the policy making process, in interacting with people on different sides of an issue, and in learning itself—recognizing that learning is a complicated process.

In addition, you may need to offer special assistance to those who are affected by public issues but not involved or well-represented in the policy making process. Such individuals may need help to allow them to participate equitably with individuals who are already involved and influential. They may benefit from additional background information or from programs designed to develop leadership and public participation skills. This special assistance is one meaning of the term "empowerment."

Different participants may need different information or process assistance. Or the information may need to be "packaged" differently (for example, with more or less detail, complexity, or sophistication) for different groups.

Delivery methods

An immense array of delivery methods has been identified by adult education specialists.[25] Learning activities need to be "ordered or sequenced so they reinforce one another to create awareness, stimulate interest and encourage behavioral change or adoption of new behavior."[26] Methods need to be tailored to the learners. The most effective methods are those that:

- foster motivation
- give clear objectives
- focus on the learners, respecting their abilities and building on what they already know
- provide opportunities for practice and feedback.

Given different learning styles, it is generally recommended that a variety of methods be used in any given educational program. Any delivery method can be appropriate for public issues education, depending on the objectives, the learners' needs, and the educator's abilities. Methods of largely one-way communication have their place.

Primarily one-way communication

- lectures
- newspaper articles
- television
- radio
- newsletters
- fact sheets
- film or video
- dramatizations
- exhibits
- tours
- consultation

Note that these can be used to communicate multiple as well as single perspectives on an issue and to communicate with audiences of diverse as well as homogeneous stakeholders. It isn't easy, however, to present complex material, either spoken or written, in a way that accurately reflects multiple points of view and satisfies a diverse audience. Partly for that reason, other methods that permit or encourage communication in multiple directions will often be better choices for the public issues educator.

Two- or multi-way formats

- dialogue
- symposium
- panel
- debate
- forum (total group discussion)
- group interview
- experience-sharing discussion
- problem-solving discussion
- study group
- participative case

Delivery methods for public issues education may also include ongoing and highly informal activities such as notes, phone calls, street-corner conversations, and any other message that serves to promote individuals' understanding of an issue and willingness or ability to work with others on its resolution.

Intensity of intervention

An educational program on a public issue can range from a single meeting, document, or consultation to a multi-year series of interrelated materials and events designed to move a community through the entire issue evolution cycle.

Programs anywhere along this spectrum can contribute to public decision making. But any effort that is seriously intended to improve the public decision making process or significantly help resolve an issue will normally need to be a major effort, involving many different delivery methods. As a general rule, you should select only a limited number of issues for such attention, and they should be chosen with care. They are likely to require a commitment of several months—perhaps even years—and the efforts of several people.

Educational programs in this sense can best be visualized as an ongoing and ever-changing sequence of various events, complemented by supplemental materials (print, video, etc.), media coverage and day-by-day feedback and consultation. The aim should be to design a package intended to get a community (or the participants) from point A to point B—from current situation to issue resolution—and then to modify the package repeatedly as the issue evolves and the educators learn from experience.

Since public issues education meshes with the evolution of the issues themselves, flexibility is essential. Such programs can be included in long-range plans of work with the understanding that they seldom unfold according to plan. You may have to adjust program decisions as the issues evolve. Unanticipated educational needs will inevitably emerge, while others that were anticipated will fail to materialize. In some cases, additional resources, beyond initial commitments, may be needed. At the other extreme, the issue may fade away, and an educational program will be dropped.

An educational program can range from a single meeting, document, or consultation to a multi-year series of interrelated materials and events.

The program may appear to be in a constant state of flux. You may be tempted to deal with this by limiting the program to familiar audiences or formats. A more appropriate source of stability is a clear mission statement for public issues education.[27] Within such a framework, you can ask repeatedly, "Is this the best way to provide educational opportunities on this issue? Is this the right approach for these learners, and for this situation?"