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How education can help resolve public issues

chapter 1

Two communities

Communities differ in the way they approach problems. Consider the following two examples.

Community 1. This community is beset by tough issues. Water quality is threatened. Jobs are scarce. Schools struggle to maintain quality and control costs; developers tangle with preservationists. New issues seem to appear weekly; old ones don't get resolved and don't go away. And to the residents of this community, the process of addressing issues is exhausting, frustrating, expensive (in time and money), unrewarding and seemingly endless. People don't trust their opponents and don't put much energy into listening or understanding others' viewpoints. Most issues are frozen in gridlock and never reach resolution.

Citizens tune out. They see politics as a continual battle, and even when they *are* concerned about an issue, they don't want to get involved in the fray. Frustrated policy makers see no way to change things. Interest groups fight among themselves. They often succeed in blocking actions they oppose, but rarely do they accomplish positive goals.

Community 2. Now consider another community that faces the same sorts of issues, but conducts its community business in a different way. Local leaders and other citizens keep an ear to the ground for emerging issues—a likely school budget shortfall, the threat of groundwater contamination, a split in community opinion about a proposed development project.

These people identify issues not to keep them quiet, but to open them up for input. Local officials often provide the impetus for investigation of an issue.

Usually they team up with other organizations perceived as neutral; for example, the League of Women Voters, the library, Cooperative Extension and the local community college.

Public forums draw out community concerns and thereby identify issues. Small study groups provide a way for those most concerned to gather information, develop shared understandings and a common mission, and expand the available options. People with different backgrounds and viewpoints are not only invited but actively recruited into the process.

Background information on a range of current local issues is available in a special file in the library, and skill-building sessions are offered several times a year to help those who lack confidence in their ability to contribute. For each issue, one person agrees to serve as process monitor and ombudsperson, hear complaints and try to ensure fairness for everyone.

This community does not lack for strong personalities. Business interests try hard to get issues framed in ways that will benefit them, as do environmentalists and neighborhood groups. But everyone knows they must listen, share facts openly, and talk about what they want and need. People accept the need for openness to more than one possible solution. When differences persist, neutral facilitators or mediators help the parties resolve their differences and move forward.

Public involvement in this community is not always without conflict, and sometimes the process seems to bog down or go into reverse. But usually, public involvement is satisfying. Differences are acknowledged and usually resolved. The

challenge of working through tough issues calls up people's thoughtfulness and creativity. When asked whether the community is a good place to live, a substantial majority answer "yes," and many consider the way the community deals with issues one reason why they feel that way.

The connections people make while they work on an issue don't stop when the issue is resolved. Former adversaries greet each other on the street and talk about common concerns. Citizens know they are bound together with people they like and dislike, agree or disagree with, as part of a vital, ongoing democratic process. They have found that conflict does not prevent people from being civil to one another and that differences can be addressed constructively. People on different sides are not enemies; they disagree on some points but agree on others. Most importantly, each protagonist during the dialogue understands why other people disagree..

The challenge

The first type of community is probably far more common. But the second type *does* exist, and there are many communities where at least some issues are addressed in the more satisfactory mode.

Community may mean a neighborhood, town, city or county; it may also mean the community of people with a common concern who become involved in a particular national policy issue—for example, the farmers, industry representatives, environmentalists, consumer advocates, and others who participate in the agricultural policy process. The process of addressing community issues is rarely without controversy. But through learning, creativity and compromise, that process can be more successful and more satisfying, than it is today.

Is this realistic? Does it make sense from the perspective of businesses, concerned citizens, or others to explore a collaborative approach to issues? What seemed idealistic and unlikely a few years ago has been proven possible by a number of successful cases. Across the country, farmers and environmentalists, corporations and school boards, young people and adults are working together in some surprising collaborations.

What does it take to create a community like the second one—or to move from the first type to the second? In most cases, community leaders make the difference—leaders with a vision and the desire to share it with their fellow citizens. To implement the vision, the community needs a shared process, some basic group skills, and people's willingness to work together. The crucial first step is to help community members grasp the possibility of a new and more satisfactory way to address issues.

Public issues

Public issues are matters of widespread concern that grow out of accumulated daily events. They are reflected in people's casual conversations and in the worries expressed by friends, neighbors, business people and local officials. They are marked by a feeling that there is a gap between *what is* and *what could be*. Public issues involve disagreement and controversy which result from different roles, values, interests and ideas. Some issue areas include:

- agriculture and the environment
- economic development and jobs
- health care
- youth at risk
- food safety and nutrition.

It's common to think of broad topics as "the issues" but it is more accurate to speak of these as "issue areas." Actual issues are more specific and encompass a question about which there is controversy, and a choice between two or more possible actions.

Broad issue area: the environment

Narrower issue: What steps should we take to protect and restore salmon in the Pacific northwest while preserving jobs and economic vitality?

Individual problems become public issues when the actions of an individual or group produce consequences that affect others. Public issues are typically resolved by a group decision process which creates public policies—policies that affect a significant number of people outside the group or organization that decides the policy. Public policies are generally enacted by local, state, or federal governments; yet the policies and actions of private organizations can also yield large-scale, public impacts, such as a corporation's decision to close down a local plant, or a church group's decision to operate a soup kitchen.¹

New ways to address public issues

Because *public* issues affect most or all of us, it's easy to assume that they fall under the domain of government, and that solutions will take the form of laws, regulations, case law (as established by the courts), executive orders, policy statements, treaties, government or government-funded programs. However, there is a growing sense that government alone cannot resolve many of the challenging problems we face today. Budgets may be insufficient or inflexible, or agencies may sidestep responsibility for dealing with the problems.

Joint efforts by private and public interests are taking on more significance as society becomes more complex. Increasingly, the public expects corporations to be responsible for their parts in creating and solving problems.

A new contract for the private sector is being written, this one (between the people and business) is primarily a social rather than economic contract... Just as successful politicians must respond to their constituents, so successful executives must anticipate and respond to the issues and opinions of importance not just to their constituents—their customers, their suppliers, their employees—but to any public that would like to participate in their decision-making.²

Learning is the reorganization of experience...which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.

—John Dewey⁴

The chairman of Atlantic Richfield Oil Company (ARCO), Robert O. Anderson, observed in 1982:

Failure to perform competently and credibly in the realm of public issues can be devastating to the prospects of any business. In fact, it is not stretching fact at all to say that business today has a new bottom line—public acceptance. Without the approval and support of society, it is obvious that financial success is irrelevant.³

Corporations and other organizations respond in various ways to the imperative identified by Anderson, but increasingly, they acknowledge it.

Not-for-profit agencies, interest groups and other citizen-based organizations also sense the need to be involved in public issues. All struggle with the challenge of being responsible community members while representing the needs and interests of their direct stakeholders.

Structured dispute resolution

Involving diverse players in public issues, and even in coalitions, does not eliminate conflict; often, it heightens it.

In the last 20 years, the field of conflict resolution or alternative dispute resolution has expanded rapidly. Especially in the areas of environmental quality and facilities siting, an increasing number of disputes are handled by a structured process which usually involves an individual or team functioning as mediator or facilitator. Negotiated settlements provide an alternative to lengthy and expensive legal proceedings, and they sometimes produce extremely innovative solutions.

Public issues education

Learning is a cornerstone of any society's ability to address public issues. On their own initiative, individuals undertake much of the learning about issues, without help or intervention from "educators." Acquiring information, developing skills, building capacity, and gaining new insights happen inevitably as part of the process of exploring issues.

Though learning always requires individual commitment and responsibility, there is an advantage to having someone make those steps explicit. If you accept the challenge of becoming a public issues educator, your role will be to find ways to enhance the natural, self-directed learning process.

Public issues education programs are intended to enhance society's capacity to understand and address issues. Usually, such education is not conducted formally in the classroom. Rather, it is a learn-as-you-go approach that utilizes a problem-solving format and emphasizes sharing information, skills and insights.

As many public groups and private corporations find, learning on the job is often the most effective way to learn because people help each other. Everyone is a potential teacher as well as a potential learner.

Public issues educators

As a public issues educator, your job is to plan and help carry out learning activities related to public issues. You may be linked to an organization such as Cooperative Extension, the League of Women Voters or the National Issues Forums, or you may be an individual who is concerned with improving the way issues are addressed. The functions of a public issues educator differ from those of a classroom teacher and may be filled by several different types of people.

A public issues educator's roles or functions may include being:

- a *convener*, who calls a group together for mutual learning, skill building, or collaborative problem solving.
- a *program planner*, who attends to the design of learning activities and the way they mesh with planning, problem solving, and decision making.
- a *facilitator*, who leads a group through a process of learning, information sharing, and problem-solving.
- an *information provider*, who identifies relevant information and delivers via lecture, print, or electronic means.

- an *adviser/analyst*, who gathers and interprets relevant information, and participates actively in identifying alternatives and anticipating consequences.
- a *forecaster*, who analyzes emerging issues to help a group begin to address issues as early as possible.

It is rare to find one person who can perform all the necessary work. It helps, therefore, to think in terms of a small team. A minimal team might include a convener and a facilitator. A larger team might include all the functions, or might add several people who serve as information providers. Often these people will not all be identified in advance. For example, as information needs become clear, it becomes apparent that certain information providers are required. One consequence: The person who recognizes the need to incorporate a learning component into an issue resolution process need not assume all the responsibility for public issues education. That person may be the convener or initiator of public issues education, and may involve others in facilitation, information provision, or advising. When a group or community grasps the significance of an educational or learning approach, the role of program planner may become a shared function, and the search for information providers will be an integral part of the collaborative process.

Neutrals and advocates

In almost every community, there are some who look beyond current issues and put their emphasis on promoting understanding through high-quality public discourse. These are the people concerned about preparing the community's future leaders. They are also concerned about nurturing a community-wide capacity to address issues. Such people may hold elected or appointed public positions or belong to an organization. They are committed to building the know-how to solve problems and seize opportunities.

There are also community leaders who have strong positions on their community's issues. Their public role involves promoting their own point of view, their own way of framing the problem, and their own set of solutions. Their priority is advocacy, but they also see the need to function in a context of learning and dialogue.

This publication can help both types of leaders—those whose top priority is to enhance their community's ability to address issues and those who advocate a certain position but recognize the need for an educational framework.

For Cooperative Extension educators

Public issues education is an approach that evolved within Cooperative Extension in the early 1990s. It builds on several key elements of the Extension tradition, some initiated 50 years ago. These include public policy education, public affairs programming, leadership development, community development and organizational development.

Extension educators have conducted public issues education programming over the years, calling it by various names and relating it to a wide range of issues. It is also practiced by people in organizations and communities—sometimes as neutral parties eager to support better decision making, sometimes as partisans who blend advocacy with their educational roles. One of the main reasons Cooperative Extension conducts leadership development programs is to create a cadre of people in agriculture, in community leadership positions and within the broader public who can help others speak to issues with insight and responsibility.

One role for Cooperative Extension is to provide training for these "volunteer" public issues educators. It may work in partnership with these people, or it may take the lead in education when the topic is crucial and the Extension agent/educator is the most appropriate person to fill the leadership role.

Whether public issues education becomes a major part of your work, or serves as a framework that illuminates the controversies linked to other educational programs, it will challenge you and enrich your work.

Public issues educators respond

We asked experienced public issues educators how they would respond to some of the concerns often raised by beginners. Their answers follow.

"I'd like to do public issues education, but I don't know how."

Tim Wallace: What we need to do is just get started, and find out what the real gaps are, instead of just imagining them.

"I don't have the process skills."

Fred Woods: You've got someone on your state Extension staff who does. It shouldn't be a problem to ask for help on process skills, just as you ask for help on subject matter skills.

Georgia Stevens: Let's clarify the issue first, then identify the skills we'll need to move ahead.

"This sort of process takes too long."

Ron Faas: It might be a situation of "take the time now or take it later." Also, there may be alternatives to the amount of time it seems like it would take.

Tim Wallace: It does take a lot of energy and a lot of time, but you can phase it in segments.

"I'm a community person. I don't have a base in an academic institution."

Tim Wallace: Communities have many resources, including universities, that they can draw on.

Fred Woods: Extension can help. Every state has at least one person with public issues education responsibility, and Extension can provide access to the relevant academic base.

"I can't generate interest, even though a real and important issue exists."

Georgia Stevens: If it's a genuine issue, there's bound to be interest. It's more a matter of uncovering the interest by bringing interested parties together.

Tim Wallace: Others must not be on your wavelength; you'll have to do a lot more sounding of the community—asking questions, then listening to the feedback.

Fred Woods: Is it your interest, or is it truly a community interest? If it truly is something the public should be interested in, maybe it's not stated in the proper way and you should work on framing the issue in a way that is meaningful to the community.

"I'm caught in the middle."

Fred Woods: That's the challenge and the fun of doing public issues education—doing solid educational work in the midst of controversial issues, and yet not becoming part of the controversy.

Tim Wallace: As facilitator, you can respond like this: "Well let's take a look. Is your point of view up here? If so, we've got it."

Ron Faas: Clarify your educational role; you may be caught in the middle because people misperceive that role.

Tim Wallace: "... And remember, my role is a facilitator and a questioner: I'm not here to advocate *any* point of view. That's *your* responsibility."

Fred Woods: Tell the same story to all the parties concerned.

Wes Daberkow: "Caught in the middle" implies there are only two options. One way to take off some heat is to generate more options.

How will I know I helped make a difference?

Fred Woods: Remember that you don't measure making a difference by *your* opinion of whether the best choice was made. It's whether people feel that they made an informed decision.

"I prefer to be an advocate, not a neutral educator."

Tim Wallace: Your credibility is at stake as a community leader. You've got to be objective about the outcomes, although not neutral about the process used for resolution.

Ron Faas: It's important for facilitators and participants to distinguish between advocating an outcome and advocating process. It is appropriate—almost inevitable—for the educator to advocate a process.

"The group I'm working with is stuck in gridlock; the issue seems impossible to resolve."

Tim Wallace: The facilitator can say to the group: "Time out! Put yourself in the other person's shoes and write down why *you* think *they* think *you're* being unreasonable."

Fred Woods: Training in mediation and conflict resolution will help.

Ron Faas: If the educator is less experienced, this may be a time to call for help. Consider calling in a negotiator or mediator to take stock of the situation, maybe help work out an appropriate course of action—possible formal dispute resolution.

"Someone is dominating the process. What can I do about it?"

Fred Woods: Remind them that others have to have their opportunity to be heard as well. If possible, before you start, try to set rules to which all agree to, to keep any one group or individual from dominating.

More tips and guiding principles

Below are excerpts from *Educating About Public Issues: Lessons from Eleven Innovative Public Policy Education Projects* by Alan J. Hahn, Jennifer C. Greene, and Carla Waterman.

- ▲ **"One element that was missing from many of the projects' interventions was 'intensity.' Successful public policy education programs require an educational intervention that is sufficiently intense or powerful to accomplish the intended aims for the intended audience and issue."**
- ▲ **"The likelihood of successful public policy education programs is enhanced when they are planned and implemented by a coalition of organizations."**
- ▲ **"Strong coalitions are not automatically formed by the coming together of two or more organizations. Rather, they must be created and carefully nurtured..."**
- ▲ **"Coalitions typically have benefits for individual and organizational members. However... individual leadership development and organizational change should not be substituted for meaningful progress in the policy arena."**
- ▲ **"Public policy education can be effective in the absence of a formal coalition, but not in the absence of the spirit or broad intentions of a coalition—specifically, the commitment to meaningfully incorporating diversity—by offering policy alternatives that reflect different points of view and, at root, different values—in the form and function of the program offered."**
- ▲ **"Different modes of public policy education are legitimate and appropriate for different audiences, issues, and contexts. The dialogue mode warrants increased attention..."**
- ▲ **"The empowerment mode... is underutilized, suggesting a future need to more concertedly reach out to groups and individuals who are currently affected by but not involved in the policy process."**
- ▲ **"Attention to process as well as content is a critical feature..."**
- ▲ **"The media are an underutilized but potentially strategic resource for public policy education."**
- ▲ **"Tensions between education and advocacy are inevitable... Guidelines saying 'educate, don't advocate' are not completely adequate."**
- ▲ **"... Purposeful attention to evaluation design would [be] helpful at the beginning of project development."**
- ▲ **"Project staff should not be the sole evaluators of their projects."**
- ▲ **"Outcomes for participants... were reported far more frequently than impacts on public issues or on the policy making process, even though the latter is clearly of interest... More emphasis is needed on the assessment of issue or process impacts."**
- ▲ **"Realistic and significant targets for [sustainable outcomes include] changes in the way participating organizations understand, value, or conduct their work (capacity-building outcomes)."**