

PUBLIC POLICY

EDUCATION

Richard Barrows

Policy

City schools ordered to curb

The Madison School Board has ordered all city schools to curb the use of profanity in the classroom. The board, in a resolution passed last week, stated that the use of profanity is a violation of the school's policy on student conduct. The resolution also states that teachers should be held responsible for the behavior of their students. The board's action comes in response to a recent incident in which a student used profanity in the classroom. The board's resolution is effective immediately.

County agent sold

The Madison County Extension Agent, John Smith, has been sold to the University of Wisconsin. Smith has been working for the county for several years and has been very successful in his work. The university has agreed to pay Smith a salary of \$10,000 per year. Smith will continue to work for the county for a period of one year before he moves to the university. The county board has approved the sale of Smith to the university.

State rejects children's hospital

The Wisconsin State Board of Health has rejected a proposal to build a new children's hospital in Madison. The board stated that the proposed hospital was not in the best interests of the state. The board also stated that the proposed hospital was too expensive. The board's decision is final. The proposal was made by the Madison Children's Hospital Association. The association has stated that it will appeal the board's decision.

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Raising drinking age

The Wisconsin State Board of Health has rejected a proposal to raise the drinking age from 21 to 25. The board stated that the proposed change was not in the best interests of the state. The board also stated that the proposed change was too expensive. The board's decision is final. The proposal was made by the Madison Children's Hospital Association. The association has stated that it will appeal the board's decision.

17% hike in tax levy

The Madison School Board has approved a 17% increase in the tax levy for the coming year. The board stated that the increase was necessary to cover the cost of the new curriculum and the new textbooks. The board also stated that the increase was necessary to cover the cost of the new teachers. The board's decision is effective immediately.

state sales tax

The Wisconsin State Board of Taxation has approved a new state sales tax. The new tax will be 5% on all goods and services. The board stated that the new tax was necessary to cover the cost of the new curriculum and the new textbooks. The board also stated that the new tax was necessary to cover the cost of the new teachers. The board's decision is effective immediately.

Legislators seek to preserve safe ground water

The Wisconsin State Legislature has passed a bill to preserve safe ground water. The bill states that the state will take all necessary steps to protect the ground water. The bill also states that the state will take all necessary steps to prevent the contamination of the ground water. The bill is effective immediately.

Lawsuit

A lawsuit has been filed against the Madison School Board. The lawsuit states that the board has violated the state's education laws. The lawsuit also states that the board has violated the state's labor laws. The lawsuit is being filed by the Madison Teachers' Association. The association has stated that it will continue to fight for the rights of the teachers.

Minority enrollment

The Madison School Board has approved a plan to increase the enrollment of minority students. The plan states that the board will take all necessary steps to attract minority students to the schools. The plan also states that the board will take all necessary steps to provide a safe and sound education for all students. The board's decision is effective immediately.

uck routes

The Wisconsin State Board of Transportation has approved a new truck route. The new route will be used by all trucks traveling between Madison and Milwaukee. The board stated that the new route was necessary to improve the flow of traffic. The board's decision is effective immediately.

n property owner

The Wisconsin State Board of Property has approved a new property owner. The new owner will be responsible for the maintenance of the property. The board stated that the new owner was necessary to improve the property. The board's decision is effective immediately.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction.....	1
Philosophical Basis for Extension.....	2
Public Policy Education	
Practical Concerns.....	4
Neutrality and Objectivity.....	10
Summary.....	16

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PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION:

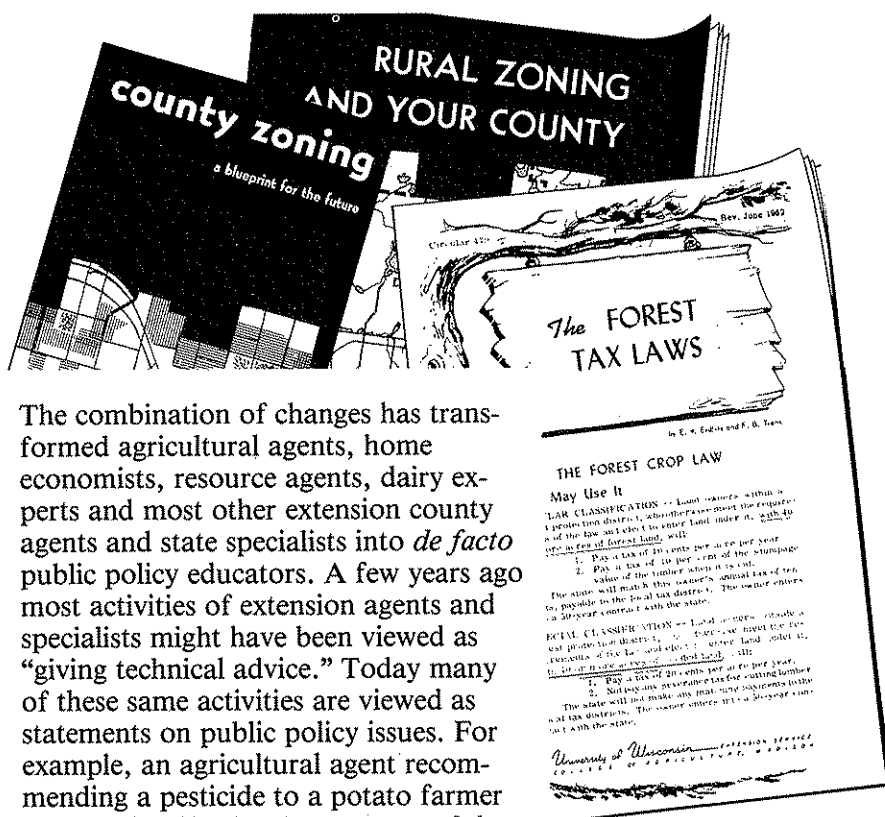
KEY CONCEPTS AND METHODS

Public policy education is an extension program that applies the knowledge of the university to public issues and educates citizens to enable them to make better-informed policy choices.

Public policy education is not new for Extension. At least as early as the 1920s extension educators were working with rural people on land use policy. Over the past six decades many of the policy issues have changed, but some have remained remarkably the same. Rural land use, taxation, management of public lands, local economic development policy, agricultural policy and many other public issues have been with us for many decades. To this list we could add programs on nutrition and health policy, many issues involving social welfare, poverty, employment and a myriad of environmental policy concerns. Some of the methods of extension educators are new, such as the Educational Telephone Network, public television, or the statewide computer communications network. However, some methods are still the same—a county agent, a state specialist, some farmers and other local citizens meet in the town hall in the dead of winter to discuss some major issue facing the town, the county, the state or the nation.

The need for policy education and the public's demand for information on public issues is probably greater today than anytime in the past. Changes in communication technology have made people much more aware of what is happening outside their local area, and how they are affected by changes in the state capital, the national economy or international trade. Citizens are also much more aware of the environmental impacts of activities such as manufactur-

ing, forestry or agriculture. Finally, local, state and federal governments have assumed a much greater role in matters such as managing the economy, protecting the public health and social welfare and improving the quality of the environment. People are increasingly interested in public policy issues and the activities of government.



The combination of changes has transformed agricultural agents, home economists, resource agents, dairy experts and most other extension county agents and state specialists into *de facto* public policy educators. A few years ago most activities of extension agents and specialists might have been viewed as "giving technical advice." Today many of these same activities are viewed as statements on public policy issues. For example, an agricultural agent recommending a pesticide to a potato farmer can hardly afford to be unaware of the policy debate concerning the use of certain pesticides and environmental protection. The agent's "technical" advice, especially if he expands his efforts to include a public defense of farm chemicals, will be viewed by many (perhaps even a majority) as equivalent to taking a policy position against environmental protection. Extension agents

These old bulletins are one example of Extension's long tradition of dealing with public policy education.

¹ Several people have contributed to the ideas in this bulletin. Glen Pulver and Bill Saupe, Department of Agricultural Economics, and Steve Born, Bud Jordahl and John Roberts, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Wisconsin-Extension, provided some very thoughtful comments on an earlier draft. Larry Libby, Michigan State University, Vern House, Montana State University, and Barry Flinchbaugh, Kansas State University, also made several good suggestions for improving the manuscript. Rusty Roland, Cornell University, provided several additional references and other comments. The author is responsible for any and all errors of fact or interpretation.

and specialists must be aware that at least part of their work involves public policy issues. *Almost all Extension agents and specialists are involved in policy, even if they do not realize it, and regardless of whether they like it or not.*²

Extension's opportunity, or obligation, to educate the public on the major public policy issues of our day is the subject of this publication. The philosophical basis for Extension involvement will be very briefly reviewed. To be successful in public policy education, the educator must hold certain values, and these will be very quickly discussed. Some organizational issues—prerequisites for successful involvement—will be briefly explored. The questions of what issues to choose, when to teach, whom to teach and how to teach will be discussed. The purpose of

the entire publication is to stimulate thought and discussion on the opportunities and pitfalls inherent in public policy education and some of the practical issues involved in conducting policy education programs.³

Even a highly technical subject may involve policy issues best handled in a public policy education framework.



PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS FOR EXTENSION PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Public policy education rests on a specific concept of the Land Grant University and its role in a democratic society. The Land Grant University in general, and Extension in particular, is concerned with the problems of people and is committed to using the knowledge of the University to improve the quality of life for the people of the state. Lest we think of Extension's mission too nar-

rowly, it is useful to recall the 1915 statement of Chairman Butterfield of the original Land Grant Committee on Extension: "It will give farmers light upon taxation as well as upon tree pruning. The rural school will have as much attention as corn breeding. . ."⁴ In many states this tradition has been upheld for many decades.

² Vern House brought to my attention a very similar argument by James Hildreth of the Farm Foundation: "All education, in one way or another involves public policy issues. This statement has become more clear in recent years. Many of the topics which used to be considered objective technical subject matter are now policy issues. . . Thus, whether you want to be in public policy education or not, you are." James R. Hildreth "Why Do Policy Education" in *Proceedings of the Southern Regional Public Policy Education Workshop*. J.B. Williams, ed., Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi, April, 1980.

³ For a thorough discussion of these issues and some examples of public policy education programs, see Verne M. House, *Shaping Public Policy: The Educator's Role*, Westridge Publishing, P.O. Box 310, Bozeman, Montana, 1981.

⁴ Quoted in R.L. Reeder, "Rethinking Public Policy Education" *Journal of Extension*, Spring, 1970, p. 18.

Public policy education is also based on a pluralist view of the democratic political process in which there are numerous individual interests and interest groups and many decision-makers with potentially conflicting interests in the various branches of government. Public policy decisions are viewed as compromises among these divergent interests. This is an extremely important concept because it implies that there is no single public interest and no optimal policy choice. The fact that there is debate means that the perceived interests of different groups conflict, giving rise to the policy issue. Any solution or resolution of the debate will favor some groups and hurt (or not help) others.⁵ Scientific knowledge, the wisdom of the university, cannot be used to determine the "correct" policy choice for society because science cannot supply the value judgement that ranks the interests of one group as more important than the interests of others. This philosophical position will have important implications for teaching methods, discussed below.

Finally, public policy education is based on a philosophical concept of the value of public participation in governmental decisions. It is assumed that if the democratic process is to function effectively, the citizenry must be well-informed of the major issues of the day, and must have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. These ideas did not originate with Extension. Plato argued that education was the key to developing good policy and social conditions in his ideal Greek city-state. Thomas Jefferson placed great faith in education and the importance of a well-educated and well-informed citizenry as the basis for representative democracy.⁶

THE EDUCATOR'S VALUES

To be effective in public policy education, the educator must operate on the basis of certain values and beliefs about human behavior, the democratic process and the role of education in a free society. The educator may recognize these values explicitly, or the values and beliefs may simply be implicit in his actions.

Enlightened Self-Interest. First, the educator must be willing to believe that *enlightened self-interest* is a reasonable guide to individual behavior. The educator must believe that individuals generally know when they are better or worse off, are able to use whatever knowledge they have to decide which courses of action are most likely to leave them better off, and are willing to try to act accordingly. Enlightened self-interest is most effective in guiding behavior if individuals have sufficient knowledge of current conditions and the consequences of various possible changes—precisely the type of information provided in a good public policy education program. The enlightened self-interest assumption should not be too difficult for most educators to accept.

A public policy education campaign must be objective and as unbiased as possible. But it will rarely be politically neutral.



B.-Wolfgang Hoffmann

⁵ Occasionally a policy issue will arise in which all groups could be made better off by some particular policy choice. Conflict occurs either because the participants in the debate are not aware of this option or because one or more of the groups favor an alternative that would make them even better-off, but that would hurt other groups (or benefit them much less), compared to the alternative in which all groups would benefit.

⁶ One of Jefferson's most widely quoted statements on education is contained in a letter to William Jarvis, September 28, 1820, in which Jefferson wrote: "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."

Enlightened self-interest does not mean that people are totally selfish. In fact, some amount of benevolence, trust and respect for the rights of others is necessary for any society to survive. For the policy educator, believing in the principle of enlightened self-interest simply means believing that people have the basic intelligence or common sense to be able to identify the best policy alternative, where each individual defines "best" in terms of his own preferences. Sometimes an individual's policy choice may be dictated strictly by his own narrow economic interest. At other times individuals may favor a policy because they believe it is best for society or morally right, even though their own interest would be harmed if the policy were adopted. In the end, a belief in enlightened self-interest reduces to the proposition that individuals know their own preferences and are able to make judgements about which policies will have results that are most in accord with their own preferences—or at least that individuals are able to make these judgements for themselves better than anyone else could make the judgements for them. In this scheme, knowledge of policy alternatives and consequences is absolutely essential for intelligent choice, and this is the purpose of public policy education.

Democratic Process. A second necessary belief for the public policy educator is that the democratic process is a

reasonable way to make decisions when not all parties are agreed on the most preferable course of action. Public policy education is based on the assumption that a well-informed citizenry is crucial to the democratic process and that the democratic process is a reasonable means of making decisions about matters in which the interests of various groups in society conflict. Although most educators subscribe to these beliefs, it is certainly legitimate to raise questions about whose interests are served by the political process and whether all interests are fairly represented.⁷

Actually, the public policy educator does not need to subscribe to the belief that the current version of the democratic process in the local community or state works perfectly. All that is necessary is the belief that the democratic process is a more reasonable means of making decisions than administrative fiat or the dictates of a single individual.

Most important, the educator must believe that (s)he does not possess the wisdom to always make the right choice for society. The public policy educator must value highly the right of individuals to make their own choices. In the end, (s)he must have some faith that a well-informed citizenry and the democratic process will produce a choice that is right for society, or at least produce a right choice more often than any other decision-making method.

PRACTICAL CONCERNS

If the educator's personal values are consistent with the philosophy outlined above, then it is appropriate to shift attention to more practical questions about beginning a public policy education program. There are a few prerequisites for a successful program. Assuming these prerequisites are met, the educator must ask: "How do I know *what issues* to tackle? How do I know

when to plan and when to teach? *Whom* do I teach?" These more practical concerns are the subject of this section.

PREREQUISITES

There are a few simple prerequisites for a successful public policy education program. These are *necessary* conditions for success, but not in themselves sufficient. Without these a program is likely to fail,

⁷ James Laue has argued that if certain groups are not properly represented in the current version of the democratic process, Extension should make a special effort to include these groups in its educational programs. This point will be discussed later in this publication. (See James Laue "Value-Free, Objective Educators" in *Coping With Conflict*, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, Iowa State University, 1979.

but meeting these conditions does not guarantee success. The prerequisites involve conflict, institutional support and information.

Conflict. Public policy education deals with issues that are controversial. A decision that is to be made by government becomes a policy issue precisely because there is controversy, a conflict among individuals and groups about the best course of action to pursue. For example, a decision to take bids on harvesting part of a state forest is usually not controversial—it is not a policy issue. But when certain individuals and groups object to timber harvest in a certain area because it destroys scenery and wilderness, *then* the matter may become a policy issue of some importance to county government. If there is no controversy, no conflict, there is no policy issue. So by definition, policy education deals with public questions or decisions over which of these are disagreements and conflicting interests. No matter how objective the public policy educational program, it is likely that some individuals or groups will object to the effort, if for no other reason than that the educational program makes the issue more visible. Besides, even absolutely factual information is rarely politically neutral.

Support. Extension as an organization must be willing, and able, to withstand the controversy and criticism that even the best public policy education project may create.⁸ Past experience suggests that there is strong support for public policy education among the leaders of Extension, and that Extension administrators will support county agents and state specialists if a good educational program draws fire in the political arena.

Because public policy education can be controversial, it pays to establish a good foundation for the program both within Extension and among outside groups. At the state level, this means informing Ex-

tension administrators and colleagues that a program is being planned. Even for the most independent state specialists that is not a particularly odious requirement and in fact will usually occur without too much conscious effort.

For county extension agents, in addition to informing colleagues and administrators, the support of the county board's agriculture and extension education committee is extremely important. Experienced agents are usually experts in involving their committee members in policy education programs. Generally it is easier to obtain support if committee members understand the basic philosophy of public policy education before any specific issue arises. In many counties Extension has a long history of involvement in public policy education and it may be relatively easy to obtain committee support. In other counties it may be much more difficult to convince the committee members that Extension has a legitimate role in dealing with policy issues.

Information. A second step in building a good foundation for a policy education program is to inform key individuals and groups on all sides of the issue that an educational program is being planned. In fact, many extension programs in policy education evolve because state specialists and county agents are already interacting with various groups and individuals with an interest in the policy issue. Again, it will be very easy and natural to inform the various interests that a program is planned. The broader the audience and the more widespread the interest in the policy issue, the more important it becomes to touch base with all the relevant interests. For example, if the audience is the voting public, the issue is a state tax limitation referendum, and the mass media will be used to disseminate information, it may be quite important to touch base with all the major interests before beginning. On the

⁸ Ron Powers, currently associate Extension Director in Iowa, has argued that Extension really has little choice in the matter: "My own view is that an extension system that purposefully avoid issues and arenas where conflict exists is doomed to mediocrity. . . viable, growing organizations must serve emerging needs and issues and incur some risk because the alternative of being 'safe' is, in reality, also 'risky.'" Ronald C. Powers, "Social Conflict in Community Resource Development and Public Policy Education" in *Coping With Conflict*, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, 1979.

other hand, if the issue is national marketing policies for cranberries and the audience is cranberry growers it may be less important to inform all possible interest groups of the plan for an educational program. (It still may be important to inform all the relevant factions among the cranberry growers). Although it may not always be *necessary* to inform a broad range of interests about a policy education program it may be *useful* to do so and may help build the perception that Extension educators make a sincere effort to maintain objectivity and neutrality in policy education. The only danger is that some important interests or key individuals are *not* informed, either because of oversight, because they had not been interacting with extension staff, or because the extension specialist or agent has already "taken sides" in the policy debate. In these cases the program and the extension educators are more likely to face charges of bias or political favoritism.

The basic point is this: (1) the subject matter of public policy education is policy *issues*; (2) issues arise because of conflict among interest groups; (3) it is possible that the policy education program will itself become part of the controversy over the issue; (4) one way to help minimize the probability of this occurrence is to touch base with interest group leaders on the various sides of the debate, *before* beginning the educational program. Other ways to reduce the probability of becoming a target for political flak will be discussed later.

WHAT ISSUES TO CHOOSE?

Public policy education is issue- or problem oriented, as distinguished from extension programs that provide general information or technical training. An appropriate issue must have several characteristics.

Public Concern. Most important, the issue must be an important *policy question*, and the object of some public concern or debate. It is useless to try to design an educational program around something perceived as an issue only by the educator or a small group of Extension faculty. The issue must be perceived as important by a significant part of the

intended audience; otherwise people will not spend the time, energy, and money to become better informed on the issue.

Issues that are defined by what extension educators are trained to do, or issues that are defined by the puzzles of an academic discipline are not likely to lead to successful public policy education programs. Similarly, the educator may correctly identify an important policy question which must be decided, but if it is not defined as an issue by the intended audience, a policy education program is not likely to be successful. For example, the use of federal lands in Alaska was an important policy issue debated at the national level in the late 1970's and early 1980's. However, it was not an important policy issue as perceived by most people in rural Wisconsin, so a public policy education program designed to reach the general public would have failed. But a similar program designed for environmental groups might have succeeded.

Raising drinking age

Whose Issue? This raises the question of *who* is "the public" that defines the issue. Clearly, it cannot be the extension educator alone or an extension committee. But it is also not necessary to have widespread concern among the general public in order to have a successful policy education program. It may be quite appropriate for an extension educator to work with a small number of key people who *do* see an issue and are struggling to resolve it. The issue may later capture the attention of a large segment of the general public, or a large segment of some interest group, such as the cranberry growers or town government officials. For example in Wisconsin, agricultural land taxation was perceived as a policy issue by only a handful of legislators and farm leaders in ear-

Part of the educator's role is to find the "teachable moment" — the point where the issue begins to attract public attention, but before everyone has taken a firm or rigid position.

ly 1974 and a small-scale policy education program was conducted. By 1975 the topic was widely perceived as a policy issue by farmers, environmentalists, local officials and many others and a much larger-scale program was organized. The basic point is that the issue must be perceived by the *public*, and particularly by the part of the public that is the intended audience for the public education program.

Issues change, and so must public policy education programs. In some cases, as a policy debate begins to form around an issue, the extension program might be designed to help people more clearly define the problem. As the issue sharpens, the debate may focus on the policy alternatives and consequences. Later, the issue may be resolved, at least temporarily, by some executive or legislative decision, and the extension program may change to provide information on what has been decided. Often a decision may simply shift the policy issue and debate from one level of government to another, and the policy education program can simply shift accordingly. In some cases, the original policy decision will later be re-evaluated and the policy education program may shift once again. There is no formula for determining the most appropriate stage of the issue to conduct an educational program. Any or all of the issue stages may be appropriate, but the program must be designed accordingly.⁹

Values and Knowledge. Not all public policy issues are appropriate for a public policy education program. Obviously, the educator must have some knowledge of the policy issue, or be able to obtain information from others. Also, the intended audience must need the information or analysis.

In general, the more an issue can be analyzed using university research or academic methodology, the more it suits a policy education program. However, this argument should not be taken to an extreme. All the facts pertinent to an issue are never available, so if any educational programs are ever to be conducted it will always be with an incomplete factual record.

Sometimes an issue may be intensely debated, but all the information, analysis and knowledge of the university may already be known by the participants in the debate. The facts are known, but differing values lead different groups to opposite positions on the issue. In these cases the extension educator has little to add. Science cannot be used to identify the most appropriate set of values. Even in this case a policy education program might have been useful at some earlier stage of the debate, before all groups had the relevant knowledge.

This does not mean that extension policy educators never deal with values. No policy issue is ever divorced from the values, beliefs and emotions of the participants in the debate. This is appropriate, because even an undisputed fact will be viewed quite differently by people with different values and interests. But often the facts get confused with the values, hopes, emotions and general misconceptions of the participants. Part of the job of the policy educator is to help people separate fact from values, beliefs, wishful-thoughts, misconceptions and emotions. The values and emotions are appropriately included in the policy debate but a better understanding and analysis of the factual record can help everyone focus more clearly on the essence of the disagreement.

⁹ For a good discussion of issue cycles see Charles P. Gratto, "Public Policy Education—A Model with Emphasis on How," in *Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies-1973*. Farm Foundation, Chicago, 1973. In that same publication the paper by B.L. Flinchbaugh ("Public Policy Education—A Model with Emphasis on What and When") and James C. Barron ("Public Policy Education—Whom Do We Teach") are also useful to read.

WHEN TO TEACH?

Some times are better than others for teaching about public policy issues. It is useless to attempt to educate people about a policy issue which they do not think is particularly relevant, important or pressing. On the other hand, if the policy debate has progressed (or degenerated) to the point where everyone has a strong opinion, leaders have expressed strong stands, personalities are closely entwined with specific positions, emotional outbursts are frequent and the debate is bitter and rancorous, an objective educational program may be ignored by almost everyone. There is a point most people have taken a position and no one wants to be confused (or embarrassed) by the facts. Policy education may not be impossible in these situations, but the effectiveness and the probability for success are much higher if the program is delivered before all the participants have publicly taken strong stands, and debate is less rigid and emotional.

Thus, the educator must seek the teachable moment—the time at which the issue is hot enough to capture people's interest, but not so hot that everyone's decision is made and the debate is becoming bitter. Taking advantage of the teachable moment means the educator must be able to foresee important issues and prepare educational materials before the issue becomes the center of public attention. In effect, the educator must invest his/her time and energy gambling that the issue will develop in a manner suitable for a public policy education program. This makes public policy education a high-risk operation. One determinant of success is the accuracy of the educator's predictions (or guesses) about future issues.

Identifying a good issue for a policy education program is more art than science. There are no secret tricks or simple worksheets for predicting which issues will be important some months or years into the future. However, many experienced county agents and state specialists are experts in forecasting the issues that will capture the attention of

state and local decision-makers and the general public. These extension educators have one common trait—they listen well. They talk to a large number of people and listen carefully to people's concerns. These concerns are often translated into policy issues, sometimes by alert elected officials who are also listening carefully to their constituents. The ability to predict a future policy issue allows the extension educator to gather and analyze information and prepare educational materials before the "teachable moment" arrives.

The teachable moment concept also implies that the traditional process of statewide extension program planning may not work well for public policy education. Policy issues arise from a rather unpredictable political process. It may not be wise to attempt to predict the policy issues six to eighteen months in advance and then base the program plans of a large number of Extension faculty on these predictions. The probability, and the cost, of an inaccurate prediction might be quite high. On the other hand, it may pay to encourage small ad-hoc groups of specialists and agents to prepare educational materials and plan pilot programs in one or two counties where the agents feel certain the issue will be relevant. If the issue develops into a major state-wide policy debate, it would be relatively easy to expand the educational program statewide. Even if the issue fails to develop as anticipated, the investment in faculty time is minimized and the effort may still have been productive in one or two counties. Other planning models may be more appropriate, but it may be dangerous to rely on traditional planning methods for public policy education programs.

WHOM TO TEACH?

Whom to teach depends on the policy issue. Obviously, not all people are interested in any given issue, so the audience is dictated by the nature of the issue debated. Those most directly affected by the issue are the most likely target audience. However, it is important not to limit the audience to tradi-

tional extension clientele. Public policy education offers Extension a chance to expand its clientele—an opportunity which should not be neglected.

Decision-Makers vs. Public. A major question in public policy education is whether to focus the educational effort on the key decision-makers in the county and state, or whether to involve the broader public, or segments thereof, in the program. Often extension programs are focused on key decision-makers, based on arguments that: (1) if the goal of policy education is “better-informed judgements” then Extension’s limited resources are best used informing those who will make the judgements; (2) the leaders, once educated, will in turn educate the general public; and/or (3) key leaders or decision-makers have the ability to immediately use the knowledge provided by the program.

The argument against focusing on key leaders or decision-makers is that: (1) if democracy is to function, a large cross-section of the citizenry must be aware of public policy issues, alternatives and consequences, so that the people can inform their representatives of their preferences; (2) if extension programs reach only the leaders, there is a danger that the democratic process is reversed—the leaders using the knowledge and information selectively to “explain” the issue, and their decision, to their uninformed constituents. In effect the argument to focus extension resources on decision-makers is equivalent to a trickle-down theory of education. The obvious problem is that the information may not trickle down, or that the information that does trickle down is highly selective and incomplete. The democratic system is based on the assumption that the people, not just the leaders, are able to use information to make intelligent decisions on public policy issues.

Although a strong case can be made against focusing extension public policy education programs exclusively on key leaders, it is sometimes simply not practical to do otherwise. In some cases faculty time or funds are so limited that only a few people can be reached with the program. In other cases a policy decision may be so imminent that there is simply not time to educate the broader public on the issue. Also, the state of the issue may be such that only a few decision-makers are demanding information—the broader public may simply not see the issue at some particular stage of the debate. Thus, whether to focus on leaders or the general public depends very much on the issue, the interest among the general public, the timing of a decision and the faculty time and funds available for the extension program.

Issues vs. Clientele. Although most policy educators focus on specific issues, some focus on a specific clientele and deal with all the issues affecting that clientele. Some county agents and state specialists work mostly with one or two clientele groups such as dairy farmers, vegetable growers or small retail merchants.¹⁰ It would be natural for these faculty to focus a public policy education program on the groups they work with most closely. Some policy issues have their biggest impact within such a group, such as dairy price policies or downtown renewal. The agent will have good relations with the group, which will make it easier to talk openly about controversial topics. Focusing on specific clientele may also help build support for extension as an organization. On the other hand, not all issues fall neatly into the realm of one or another of Extension’s clientele groups. Also, the extension faculty person may begin to identify too closely with the clientele group, jeopardizing his ability to view policy issues in a neutral, objective manner.

¹⁰ For a good discussion of some of the points in this section, see Vern House, *Shaping Public Policy*, op.cit., pp. 42-44.

NEUTRALITY AND OBJECTIVITY

The only absolute rule in public policy education is that the program and the information must be objective and as neutral as possible. The extension educator must strive to present the knowledge pertinent to the issue in an objective and unbiased manner. This means that the extension educator must not become an advocate of any specific position in the policy debate.

TWO MODELS

Teaching in the field of public policy education can follow one of two basic models. The first can be termed the *Advocacy Model*, in which the educator advocates one position or supports one group in the policy debate. The second model is the *Alternatives-Consequences Model*, in which the educator helps people analyze the policy alternatives and likely consequences of each, but does not advocate any particular decision.

The Advocacy Model has two variations. The first is rather simple—the educator examines the issue in light of his professional knowledge and his own values, identifies the policy alternative he believes is best for society and argues strongly for his position using his interpretation of the scientific evidence. If the educator works only with one clientele, such as dairy farmers, he may try to identify the policy he thinks would be best for that group.

In its second variation, the Advocacy Model is much more complex and is based on the argument that the extension educator should work to enhance the democratic process.¹¹ Three basic arguments are used to support this version: (1) the democratic process does not work well unless all groups affected by a decision are represented in the decision-making process; (2) education is never neutral because only those with power can use new knowledge effectively, so education could result in a *less* fair pro-

cess of decision-making; (3) extension educators must logically either advocate a particular policy *choice*, or must advocate a fair and just democratic *process* by which social choice is made.

Therefore, the final argument is that Extension educators should be advocates of a fair democratic process, which means helping groups without power obtain better representation in the decision-making process.

The Alternatives-Consequences Model of policy education has two variations. In the most often used version, the educator helps people clarify the problem or issue, outlines the policy alternatives, presents the likely consequences of each alternative and then leaves the decision to the people and the democratic process. This version is used if: (1) the audience is large; (2) the audience is the general public; or (3) the education message (written or spoken) is directed at individuals with diverse values or interests in the issues.

A second version, which might be termed the *consequences-alternatives model*, can work if everyone in the clientele group has similar values and interests. In this case the group explains its objectives, then the educator helps them understand which policy alternatives might produce those consequences and which side effects, or other consequences, might also result. This version of the Alternatives-Consequences model is often used with a small, homogeneous group or with a single individual in an informal meeting. This modification of the model does not necessarily transform the educator into an advocate *if* his/her approach is objective and educational, and if the educator works with a variety of groups with conflicting interests and does not become too closely identified with any one group or point of view. This approach is useful and practical in many situations, but can also be more

¹¹ This version of the Advocacy Model is very well articulated in two short articles by James H. Laue: "Coping with Conflict: Understanding Strategies and Developing Skills" and in "Value-Free Objective Educators". Both papers are contained in *Coping with Conflict: Strategies for Extension Community Development and Public Policy Professionals*, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, Iowa State University, Ames, 1979.

dangerous because: (1) the educator assumes that the group understands the basic problem, which may not be the case; (2) the educator must assume that the audience does, in fact, agree on the basic consequences desired, which also may not be the case; and (3) the educator risks being identified as an advocate unless he works with many groups with opposite viewpoints.

The Alternatives-Consequences Model, or some variation of the model, is the most appropriate teaching method for public policy education. The arguments in its favor are: (1) the educator has no right to assume an advocacy position; (2) the educator is not necessarily trained or competent to assume the position of a professional advocate; (3) the advocacy method is ineffective and will eventually destroy the educator's credibility; (4) the Alternatives-Consequences model is more consistent with a democratic political system and the philosophical basis for public policy education. In the end, however, a program which is carefully designed and perfectly objective may be perceived as politically biased, and although apolitical in spirit, will generally not be politically neutral. These arguments will be briefly explored.

First, the educator has no right to assume an advocacy position. Public policy education involves public issues on which everyone is not agreed. Reasonable people disagree on the appropriate course for society, based on their values, attitudes and beliefs and their own interests at stake in the decision. Although the weight of objective evidence may occasionally be overwhelmingly in favor of one side of the policy debate, the vast majority of issues involve situations in which: (1) the necessary objective data are not all known; or (2) the known facts can be legitimately interpreted in two or more

ways; or (3) the facts are known and have only one interpretation but different value systems lead individuals to choose different policy alternatives; or (4) combinations of the first three cases.

In the typical situation, for the educator to assume an advocacy position is tantamount to making the assertion that he has the only clear view of the facts, can make all the right interpretations and has the socially optimal or only correct set of values. If the society believed this, extension specialists and agents would be proclaimed philosopher-kings. Extension faculty were hired to be educators, so it is best not to assume the other role.

Second, the educator is not trained in the unscientific art of advocacy. The essence of science is the balanced weighing of evidence. *Advocacy* implies making a case for one side or another. *Science* implies a balanced consideration of facts on both sides of the issue. The extension educator is trained a biological, social or physical scientist, not as an advocate.¹²

Are There Alternatives to Aldicarb?

The controversy over aldicarb and new restrictions on its use and chemical dealers to look closely at alternatives. On Long Island, aldicarb has not been used on potatoes since 1979, research indicates.

Third, the Advocacy Model is not likely to be effective in the long run. If the extension educator advocates a particular position, he will alienate a part of the public that holds other positions. If the educator repeats his advocacy role on issue after issue, he eventually alienates virtually everyone. At some point his credibility declines to the point that he is no longer effective as an extension educator because no one is willing to

Rather than advocate a particular policy, the Extension educator is better off listing alternatives and explaining the likely consequences of each choice.

¹² For a discussion of advocacy, scientific knowledge and the activities of scientists, see "Science, Values, and Human Judgement," by Kenneth R. Hammond and Leonard Adelman, *Science*, Vol. 22, pp. 389-396, October, 1976.

listen. Even those who focus exclusively on a single clientele group eventually lose credibility if they assume an advocacy position on each issue. Although their clientele may be united on some issues, the group may be strongly divided on others. Eventually the advocate will alienate almost everyone, even in the most narrowly-defined clientele group. The Advocacy Model is also potentially disastrous for Extension as an organization. If individual specialists and agents each choose the Advocacy Model on sensitive issues, they will collectively alienate just about everyone and reduce the level of support for Extension as a whole. Thus, the advocacy position may enable the educator to effectively advance his positions in the short-run, but in the long-run it is not tenable for the individual or for the Extension organization.

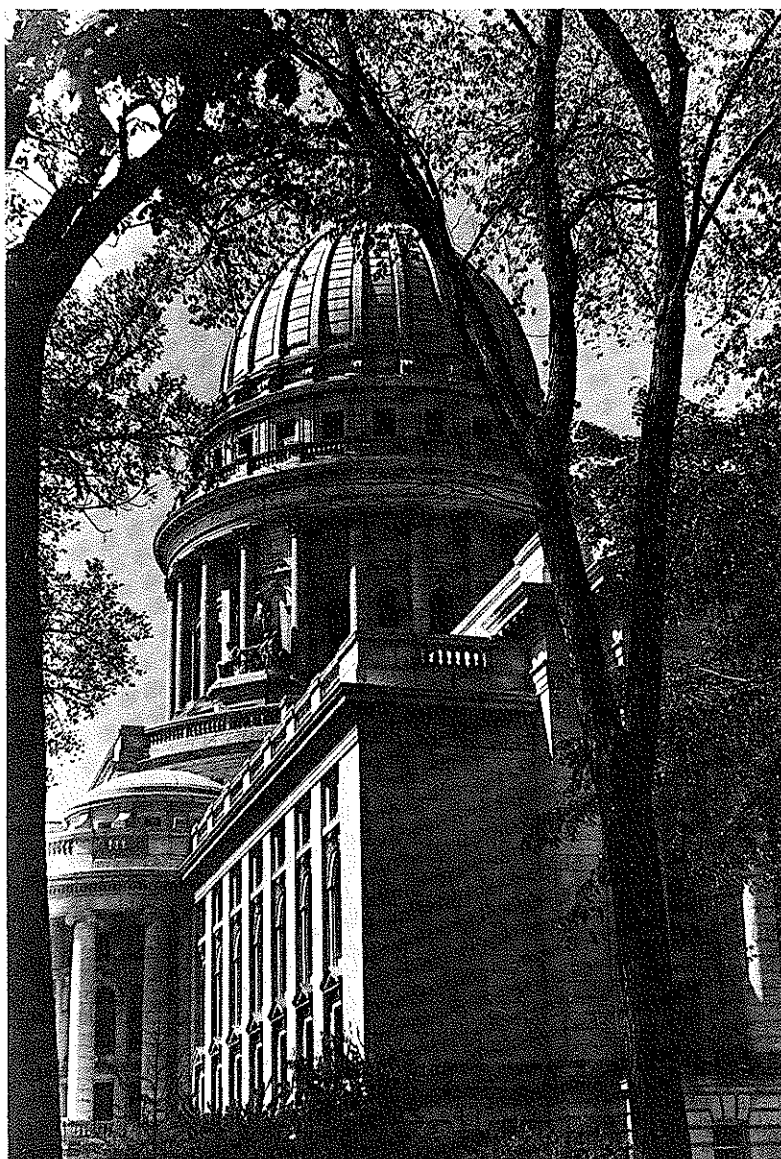
Fourth, the Alternatives-Consequences model is consistent with the democratic political system and general philosophy of public policy education. If citizens are to participate effectively in the political process, they must understand the policy issues, the policy alternatives and the likely consequences of each. The facts must be presented objectively, but the value judgements for selecting a single alternative must be applied by the people and their elected representatives, not by the educator. The representatives of the people are elected to make the necessary value judgements. They stand exposed to constituents who can lobby them to influence their decisions and remove them from office if their value judgements do not coincide sufficiently with the public's. The educator's role is to make certain that the people and their representatives are presented with an objective analysis of the problem, the policy alternatives and their likely consequences. The choice is appropriately left to the people and to the political process. Our responsibility as educators is to teach people how to think, not to think for them.

A final set of criticisms can be leveled at the version of the Advocacy Model that claims the educator should work to help

empower groups whose interests are not represented in the democratic process. First, the empowerment argument maintains that information is more valuable to those with power than to those without power. This is not always true, and in fact may very seldom be true. If the public is not informed about a problem or issue then those with decision-making power are free to do as they please with no threat of public reaction. Information is power, and information can help those outside the formal decision-making channel at least as much as those on the inside. Second, if the educator proposes to help empower those groups whose interests are not represented then (s)he must define what "adequate representation" means in a democracy. In an extreme case this might be fairly easy, e.g., everyone should be able to vote, hold office or speak freely. But in almost any practical situation it is never quite clear how much representation is enough and how much is too little. The educator must assume the role of the philosopher-king in order to be this type of advocate. Finally, few would disagree that the democratic process works best when the "rules of the game" allow people to participate in making decisions that affect them. But these rules are not immutable—if we think that the interests of some groups are not adequately represented we can change the way the decision-making process works. For example, this is exactly what happened with the National Environmental Policy Act in the early 1970's which gave environmentalists a very strong voice in many decisions by establishing requirements for environmental impact statements. Most important for the educator is the fact that possible changes in the rules for making decisions can themselves be the subject of an objective educational program conducted in an alternatives-consequences framework. The educator can avoid becoming an advocate even when (s)he deals with issues that would change the relative power of various groups in the decision-making process.

THE EDUCATOR AS CITIZEN

None of this means that the educator cannot express his opinions on public issues or lobby his elected representatives *in his role as a private citizen*. The difficulty, of course, is that it is not so easy to separate the actions of the educator from those of the private citizen. For many extension educators the line between advocacy as an educator and advocacy as a private citizen is not totally clear. The more visible the educator's advocacy as a citizen, the more likely it is that (s)he will be perceived as an advocate in his (her) educational work. Many extension faculty who deal with public affairs consciously decide to engage in very little, or very low-key political activity off the job in order to avoid confusing the public as to which role they are playing. Others concentrate on national rather than state or local issues. This may help but will not always avoid the problem because local feelings may run as high on national issues as on issues closer to home. Often, county agents and state specialists (including the author) will take a temporary leave-of-absence to work in state or local government. Often this requires the individual to assume an advocacy position on some issues. But even if the individual follows a strictly objective program and tries to avoid advocacy, many people will assume that the individual is an advocate simply by his position in government. All of these concerns do not mean that public policy educators cannot exercise the political rights and freedoms of a U.S. citizen, nor does it mean that the educator, the extension organization and the state/local government should give up the great benefits that come when people move from one position to another. These issues are raised as a reminder that there is an inevitable trade-off between political or governmental activity on one hand and one's perceived objectivity and nonadvocacy on the other. Each individual must seek a balance that (s)he believes is appropriate.



Michael Venner

OBJECTIVITY AND POLITICAL NEUTRALITY

The relationship between objectivity and political neutrality should be explored carefully. Public policy education programs must be objective. Obviously, complete objectivity is humanly impossible, but people generally recognize and respect an effort to be as objective as possible.¹³ The most important point is that the educator must avoid becoming an advocate for one group or one position on the issue. In striving for objec-

¹³ For a similar argument on the importance of striving for objectivity, see J. Carroll Bottom, "Public Policy Education: Purpose Methodology, and Accomplishments" in *Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies-1980*, Farm Foundation, Oak Brook, Ill. 1980.

tivity and avoiding advocacy the educator will in fact be trying to maintain a position of strict neutrality among the various interests active in the political debate.

However, objective information, an unbiased approach and lack of advocacy do *not* necessarily mean that the educator or his program is politically neutral. Political neutrality may be impossible to maintain because there is an inevitable bias in the issues we choose to address, and because simply discussing an issue may favor one group or another.

The issues we choose are influenced by our professional training and our own professional judgement about what is sufficiently important to warrant our attention. Also, we all tend to work on problems that our values tell us are important; we do not choose to work on things that we believe are bad or harmful. In fact, many people will assume that the educator is an advocate of some alternative or another, simply because (s)he chooses to talk or write about the issue.

An objective public policy education is also not politically neutral because it alters the political balance of power on the issue. First, when we conduct an educational program on a specific issue, we increase the public's awareness of that issue—hardly a politically neutral act even if the program is completely objective. Second, simply providing objective information to the public may upset the strategy of one side or another in the political debate. For example, when voters lack information on tax-increase referenda, they are more likely to vote *no*, other things being equal. Providing perfectly objective information on a tax-increase referendum is not politically neutral because it tends to favor a yes vote. Third, increasing a group's

understanding of an issue increases its ability to effectively use whatever political leverage it may have. In fact, knowledge is power. An educational program will benefit groups without good knowledge of the issue more than groups that already clearly understood the policy alternatives and consequences.

Clearly, even the most objective and unbiased public policy education program will not be politically neutral. Objectivity and a non-advocacy method will not produce political neutrality. One implication is that even a perfectly objective public policy education program conducted in the alternatives-consequences manner runs some chance of generating political controversy with which the educator and other Extension faculty and administrators must deal.

On this point, Neill Schaller, former head of the Federal Extension Service noted that “. . . we cannot expect to be loved when we deal with controversy. But we will be widely respected if we do it right. So how do we make that happen? First, we should insist that those who teach and prepare materials resist the temptation or the pressure to take sides when dealing with a controversial issue. . . .”¹⁴

Over the years, public policy educators have developed some teaching methods to reduce real or perceived bias in their information. Identifying the groups potentially affected by an issue/problem or its solution, and viewing the problem from *their* perspective can help ensure that the relevant alternatives and consequences are identified. Many public policy educators try to avoid classifying consequences as “advantages,” “disadvantages” or “pro-con” because what is an advantage to one group may be a disadvantage to another.¹⁵ Including “do nothing” as a policy alternative may help eliminate real or perceived bias and is often a useful way of illustrating the

¹⁴ Memo from W. Neill Schaller to State Extension Directors, November 27, 1978; Office of Deputy Director for Extension, Science and Education Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ See Robert J. Bevins, “Defusing Public Decision,” in *Community Decision Making*, University of Missouri-Columbia, Extension Division, no date.

extent of the problem. (Some educators may be tempted to advocate doing something but not advocating a specific action. Yet if the problem is obviously so bad the "do nothing" alternative will be quickly rejected by everyone). Asking leaders or others on all sides of the issue to review teaching materials can also help identify information that may be perceived as biased. But if one group is asked all should be asked. In the end, the ability to listen to others' views and to emphasize with others' perspectives is probably the best guarantee that the teaching materials and methods will avoid major bias, and that the educator will be perceived as striving for objectivity.

SUMMARY

Public policy education enables citizens to make better informed decisions on public issues. It is consistent with the mission of the Land Grant University and is based on a Jeffersonian view of the importance of education in the democratic political process.

To function effectively in public policy education the educator must have faith in the democratic process and in the ability of well-informed people to make good public decisions. As an organization, Extension must support its staff in policy education projects because even the most objective and unbiased program may generate political controversy.

A public policy education program must deal with the issues defined by the public, not those defined by extension educators. Not all issues are appropriate subjects for policy education programs; extension educators must have the necessary knowledge, the issue must be amenable to factual analysis, and the program must be ready at the teachable moment. The only absolute in public policy education is that the extension program should be as objective and unbiased as possible. Advocacy is not an effective or desirable teaching method; instead the educator should help people better understand the problem, the policy alternatives and their likely consequences. This method allows the educator to apply the knowledge of the university to public policy issues in a manner that strengthens public participation in the democratic decision-making process.