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Public Issues Education: Exploring Extension's Role

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Public Issues Education: Exploring Extension's Role

Abstract

Extension educators in all program areas have become increasingly involved with controversial public issues in recent years. Given the nature of these issues and the expectations placed on agents and specialists by the public and by university officials, Extension's continued involvement seems inevitable. This article provides a conceptual framework that identifies potential roles for public officials, the general public, and Extension professionals in dealing with public issues. The article concludes with some specific advice for Extension educators involved with programming that addresses controversial topics.

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Introduction

Extension agents and specialists throughout the U.S. have been actively involved with public issues education for years (Kraft, 1999; Frederick, 1998; Boyle & Mulcahy, 1993; Fulleylove-Krause, 1991; Hahn, 1990). Current examples include: community development programs on land use conflicts, family and consumer sciences programming on food safety and on welfare reform, and agricultural programs focused on the environmental and social impacts of large-scale livestock operations.

Educational programs focused on public issues, when compared to those addressing the technical problems Extension normally deals with, are more likely to involve disagreement and controversy. Because of this, many Extension professionals are reluctant to get involved lest they become embroiled in the controversy. This article explores the difficult aspects of public issues and suggests an approach to public issues education that increases the likelihood of successful involvement.

Extension's Commitment to Public Issues Education

While public issues education (PIE), under one name or another, has long been a part of Extension's mission, it received new prominence in 1992, when the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) issued a position statement titled *Public Issues Education: The Cooperative Extension System's Role in Addressing Public Issues*. The position statement set forth a new, broad definition of PIE as "educational programs that have the objective of enhancing the society's capacity to understand and address issues of widespread concern." This ECOP statement set out a bold vision of PIE as a focus that will make Extension "the most visible component of the land grant university of the twenty-first century."

In an article that appeared at approximately the same time, Boyle and Mulcahy (1993) argued that public policy education is Extension's "path to political support." They articulated a concern about the continuing public perception "that Extension programs are the same today as they were in the

early years, focused on a dwindling population of farmers and rural homemakers and no longer necessary in the rapidly changing society we live in today." They sought to promote public policy education as the type of programming that will make Extension more relevant in the future.

The Complex Nature of Public Issues

Dealing with public issues requires recognition of the difference between an issue and the related underlying problem. A public issue is a "matter of widespread [public] concern" (Dale & Hahn, 1994). Normally, it reflects a public recognition that something isn't the way it should be and that a public remedy is called for. The concern is usually related to an identifiable problem. Sometimes, however, public issues are based on perceptions that may or may not be accurate.

For example, a local community expresses concern about excessive teen pregnancy. When local health officials are consulted, it turns out that the teen pregnancy rate is comparable to that of other communities. Does the community concern call for a new effort to deal with teen pregnancy? Community leaders and educators might decide that the best way to deal with the issue would be an information campaign describing the success of existing programs designed to reduce teen pregnancy. Such a campaign would be intended to deal with the public issue, not the underlying problem.

Sometimes public issues encompass a complex set of underlying problems. A prime example is the current widespread concern about urban sprawl. Different segments of the public have dramatically different ideas about what the problem really is, or whether there is a problem at all. This total lack of agreement on the underlying problem does not stop various constituencies from demanding a public response to the "problem" of urban sprawl. Given these circumstances, the fact that few public officials have been able to solve this problem is not surprising.

Another confusing aspect of some public issues is that they arise from the private actions of individuals. Normally, when an individual does something that isn't criminal but which someone else objects to, we have a private dispute, not a public issue. Private disputes occur all the time and are resolved by a wide variety of means such as civil actions in court.

However, when one of the parties to a private dispute finds a way to involve a public agency or to generate widespread public concern, the private dispute has become a public issue. A prime example of this sort of issue would be the proposed siting of a large livestock facility. As with the teen pregnancy example, the community will need to do something to deal with the public issue even if the individual can legally site the facility.

A Public Issues Typology

One way for government officials and Extension educators to approach public issues that reduces the uncertainty of how to respond is to start by doing an issue analysis to determine whether the issue has a clear underlying problem and, if the problem is clear, whether there is a generally accepted solution. The proposed typology, shown in Table 1, is an adaptation of a typology developed by Heifitz and Sinder (1988) in their article on political leadership. The related Table 2 is an application of the typology to the principal roles of public officials and the public itself in dealing with public issues.

Table 1
Typology of Public Issues

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Underlying Problem	Clear	Clear	Unclear
Solution to Problem	Clear	Several alternatives	To be discovered
Examples	Potholes in streets	Inadequate school funding	Urban sprawl

For Type I public issues, the underlying problem is clear. A good example would be public outcry about potholes on Main Street. The best solution to the problem is also clear, because in most jurisdictions we might assume that there is an established procedure for repairing potholes. As shown in Table 2, finding a solution to the problem of potholes would not require involving the public in a problem-solving process. It is reasonable to leave it to public officials.

For Type II public issues, the problem is also clear, but there are several possible solutions. An example might be inadequate public school funding. Just about everyone would agree that this is a problem, but it is likely that there are competing solutions being proposed by various individuals and groups. To get public acceptance of any proposed solution, government officials would be well advised to allow the citizens to play a major role in determining the solution.

For Type III public issues, there is an issue, but there is no consensus on what the underlying problem really is. An example of such an issue would be urban sprawl, as discussed above. When there is no agreement on what the problem is, logically there can be no consensus on what the

solution should be. In such situations, however, there will be no shortage of proposed solutions, each addressing the problem as seen by the group proposing the solution. As Table 1 indicates, the eventual solution to such an issue is still "to be discovered."

Table 2
Principal Roles for Government Officials and the Public in Addressing Public Issues

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Government officials	Implement solution.	Publicize alternative solutions.	Encourage public discussion.
The public	None	Consider proposed solutions.	Increase understanding of the issue. Consider approaches.

Type III public issues have become largely insoluble in many American communities. Most public officials realize that they can't solve such issues on their own, but they have not devised effective ways to involve the public (Matthews, 1999). The attempt to hear what the public wants through public hearings has become counter productive. Citizens have decided that public hearings are contests to see who can bring the most partisans to the meeting. Once there, the game is to loudly express a given position and seek to discredit the other side. It is not surprising that public officials now shy away from seeking public guidance on complex public issues.

In order to re-engage the public, government officials will need to call on public issues educators from Extension or other sources to assist them by designing and facilitating a public involvement process. Such a process needs to go beyond the registering of individual opinions. The public will need to deliberate, i.e., listen to each other's views and seek common ground for action. Such processes are not easy, and will require committed public officials, skillful facilitators, and an engaged citizenry.

The Public Issue Typology and Extension Public Issues Education

Public issues education requires Extension professionals to play two different types of roles: "content expert" and "process expert." A great deal of what most Extension professionals do fits neatly into the content expert role. However, a major component of public issues education requires a different professional role. While outside the university this role is generally referred to as that of "facilitator," public issues educators prefer the term "process expert." Table 3 differentiates between the possible roles for content experts and process experts for each of the three types of public issues.

Table 3
Key Roles for Public Issues Educators

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Content experts	Provide information.	Analyze proposed solutions.	Conduct issue research & analysis.
Process experts	None	Facilitate public deliberation	Frame the issue in public terms. Facilitate public deliberation.

Type I public issues are very similar to the kinds of private problems Extension professionals deal with all the time. If relevant information is available, the professional's role would be to provide it to public officials. Depending on the issue, the public will also have an interest in the information. Process experts have no role to play for these issues.

Type II public issues call for a larger Extension response. A key role for content experts is to explain to public officials and the public what the various possible solutions to the problem would entail, especially the possible consequences of each proposed solution. Process experts need to work with public officials to develop opportunities for citizens to come together to discuss the proposed solutions and to devise ways for the people to express a preference for the best solution. Within Extension, this has been referred to as the "alternatives-consequences model of public policy education" (Barrows, 1993)

As mentioned above, Type III issues require public involvement from the beginning if there is to be a public/government response to the issue. Content experts will need to do research on both the issue (what people are concerned about) and the underlying problems. Process experts have an even larger role to play. They need to involve the public in framing the issue in public terms. This means developing a framework for public discussion that acknowledges the numerous (sometimes confused) possible approaches to the issue that are in public circulation. With this accomplished, process experts will need to work with public officials to organize community forums where citizens can participate in deliberative discussion. Process experts would also need to be moderators for those community forums.

The Wide Range of Professional Activities Involved in Public Issues Education

As discussed above, there are both content expert and process expert roles in public issues education. Some Extension professionals will restrict themselves to content roles, some to process roles, and some will try to do both. Depending on the issue, public issues education could involve any or all of the following professional activities.

Content Expert Roles (focus on research and teaching)

- **Issue monitor** - identifying emerging public issues
- **Issue researcher** - conducting applied research (e.g., public opinion polls)
- **Information provider** - providing objective information (written or oral) on an issue
- **Technical advisor** - interpreting information for stakeholders
- **Policy analyst** - analyzing policy alternatives with their likely consequences

Process Expert Roles (focus on facilitating resolution of the public issue)

- **Stakeholder analyst** - meeting with stakeholder groups to understand their views on the issue
- **Meeting convener/facilitator** - bringing stakeholders together exchange views and build understanding
- **Issue framer** - finding a way to describe the issue in public terms to increase the chances of public participation
- **Public forum convener** - developing a process to involve the public in seeking solutions for a public issue
- **Forum moderator** - facilitating a public discussion to produce deliberation and shared understanding
- **Designer/facilitator of a formal dispute-resolution process** - functioning as part of a trained Extension team in dealing with polarized disputes

Most Extension professionals will feel they have the ability to perform the content expert roles when dealing with a public issue involving their area of expertise, although even here there are potential pitfalls. In some cases, simply raising public awareness of an issue can get an agent into a controversy. For example, community members seeking to maintain the status quo may resent Extension educational programming that has the effect of increasing public interest in change.

A thorough grounding in process expert roles would be unlikely for anyone in Extension who has been hired for a particular content expertise. While these roles do not necessarily require formal training, they do require the development of a neutral disposition, and, most important of all, they require "learning by doing." Learning by doing requires opportunities to observe other professionals in action and the establishment of mentoring arrangements. In summary, process roles require both knowledge of group processes and the sound judgment needed to use these processes appropriately in politically charged settings.

Effective Public Issues Education in the Future

One underlying problem for Extension public issues educators derives from the difference between the academic and public views of useful information. For academics, research-based information is supreme. For many public issues, especially those that involve value-based conflicts, this type of information may address only a small part of the issue. The public needs information that addresses the positions advocated by all stakeholder groups. To fulfill this goal, public issues educators need to become familiar with information originating outside of academia.

Another challenge arises in situations where Extension state faculty have ongoing research and outreach programs which support a position that later becomes one side of a local public issue. A good example of such a position would be the economic rationale for expanding farm size.

For a community experiencing a controversy over large (mega) farms, the economic imperative of the producer is just one side of the issue. Unfortunately, a county agent attempting to help his/her community deal with this issue is frequently viewed as biased because the university has only published information that favors one side of the issue. The fact that the information is research-based will not overcome this local perception of the university as having a bias.

A related problem can arise for Extension professionals who provide ongoing advice and support to client groups (economic development groups, commodity groups, etc.). When public issues emerge involving the interests of these groups, it is particularly difficult for those closely allied Extension professionals to avoid the appearance of bias.

Consequently, in such situations they will have to excuse themselves from playing a process expert role. Ideally, public issues education in Extension will involve a core team of process experts who, depending on the issue, bring in appropriate content experts. Several Extension services throughout the U.S. have established public issues education teams for this purpose in recent years. A list of some of the Web sites associated with these efforts is provided at the end of this article.

Some Extension traditionalists may question whether the process expert role is "education." It is

true that this role is quite different from the traditional Extension role of providing technical information to clientele. However, as the framework presented in this article proposes, this role is an essential part of effective public issues education.

Finally, an understanding of the principles described in this article will enhance Extension's ability to conduct educational programs that address controversial public issues. This is an important goal in that the involvement of Extension educators in public issues education will almost certainly increase in the future, given the expectations of clientele and university officials alike.

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Selected University Public Issues Education Web Sites

North Carolina State: <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/agecon/PIE>

Oregon State: <http://www.osu.orst.edu/dept/pie/>

Colorado State: www.colostate.edu/Depts/CoopExt/EDUCPGMS/PUBPOL/pubpmenu.html

Ohio State: <http://www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~pie>

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