

POLICY EDUCATION ON NON-TRADITIONAL SUBJECTS: A PROGRAM ON PUBLIC UTILITY REGULATION

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Increasingly we find that important public policy issues are outside of our traditional fields of competence in the land-grant system. Yet, we are increasingly under pressure to look at these issues and deal with them as educators. Part of the reason for this is that our clientele has broadened considerably in recent years, and our traditional rural and agricultural clientele is more integrated into the rest of the nation and affected more and more by new outside forces.

The basic problem we have been forced to face is, how do we deal with educational program needs where our competence in the subject matter area may just not be there? Our recent experience in dealing with one such area may prove helpful to others facing similar circumstances. In this case, the issue involved is a most important one, but it is not covered by the specific expertise of the policy educator or the department level colleagues of the policy educator.

The first thing we have often found is that we are not quite as ignorant of some of the new subject matter areas we have taken on as we initially thought we were. In addition, our public policy education methodology of defining issues and presenting alternative solutions and their consequences does in fact provide a very valuable format to follow which makes the preparation of an educational program much easier than it would be otherwise. The methodology gives us a structure not only for the program but also for the task of assembling the appropriate information in a coherent package.

In this case we were convinced that public utility regulation, the rules of the game under which the public sets rates and determines the activities of the regulated monopolies, was fast becoming a critical policy issue in the state of Indiana. Further, it was not unlikely that citizens would march on the statehouse if electric and gas rates continued to increase at their recent pace while the public understood little or nothing about the process of public regulation or the basic economics of the utility industries involved.

Until recently, the public has not needed to be knowledgeable about

public utilities. Electric rates declined constantly in real terms from the end of the Second World War until the early 1970s. There was no need for the average consumer to be concerned with the nature of the electric industry or the process through which electric rates were set. By doing nothing, rates declined. What more could be asked? A variety of factors led to increasing real electric and gas rates starting in the mid-to early 1970s, and all of a sudden utility consumers of all classes became concerned and forced their political representatives to become concerned. However, the knowledge base of those now concerned about utilities is very limited.

One of the major concerns about policy education is finding the teachable moment for such education. Ideally, the education will occur when people are interested in the issue, but have not yet committed themselves to a course of action. With this issue there were mixed signals. Specific groups, like the consumer's action coalition and the electric industry, had firm beliefs and plans of action. However, much of the public and a number of their legislative and other political representatives had not yet really defined the issues and didn't know which questions were the important ones to ask. Thus, while a small portion of the potential audience was firmly committed to specific alternatives, the bulk of the affected public didn't even know what the alternatives might be.

Public policy education is supposed to help the audience begin to separate facts from values and to verify the critical facts surrounding the issues, the alternatives and their consequences. Much of the notion that the land-grant system is an appropriate purveyor of such education stems from the belief that the research base of the land-grant institution provides a resource for the determination of critical facts. This causes some difficulty when the policy educators happen to be removed in training and in discipline from where the facts reside for an issue.

In retrospect, we did several things correctly to get ourselves geared up to be able to handle the facts of the electric and gas industry and their regulation. Early in our preparation, we went to the committed groups (the utilities, the consumer groups, etc.) and described to them the kind of educational program we were planning to carry out. We then asked each group what they thought the critical issues were, and also got their description of the facts (as they saw them) surrounding these issues. Second, we paid the admission fees and attended two excellent conferences dealing with the regulation of natural gas and the state of electric utilities in the Midwest. Third, we called in some of our chips with the engineering school and drew upon their expertise in specific engineering related areas, and, fourth, we read everything we could lay our hands on that seemed relevant.

As partial compensation for our insecurity about the subject area we spent the time and resources to get absolutely first class visuals

for our presentation. This was a very wise decision. It boosted our morale, and the clarity of our visuals overcame some of the initial fuzziness of our own presentation. We were also dealing with audiences that included industrial representatives and others who just don't put up with the confused and messy visuals that extension economists sometimes inflict upon their rural and farm audiences. The outward appearance of our presentation was as polished as possible.

Our audiences were modest in size — 30 to 60 people per meeting. One of the interesting things to us was that the local employees of the major utilities attended our meetings en masse. They told us that they wanted to see if their home office had been telling them the “truth” about the issues involving their utilities. Overall our audiences included some farm representation, some rural representation, much suburban representation, strong utility representation, some state legislators and some industrial and small business representation.

Would we go out and do it again? We probably would. We have always done a certain amount of policy education where the subject matter was not totally familiar to us. Our work in public utilities is about as far as we have gone from the familiar, and we did have some background because of earlier work in energy policy. However, the state regulatory aspects and the background of the electric industry were brand new.

If you plan to push into new areas and take the risk that is involved, certain facts need to be recognized when gearing up to take on such an issue:

1. The time involved in planning and executing a public policy education program in an unfamiliar subject matter area is tremendous.

2. Given that the investment will be great for such a program, you had better be sure you are convinced that this is a critical issue.

3. As you prepare, be sure to visit with all interested parties that might be involved in the issue and get as much help as possible from them in identifying the issues and defining their impression of the facts. In our traditional areas of concern, we tend to know where all the bodies are hidden, and are aware of who has done what to whom. This is critically important information for giving an educational program that is viewed as “straight” by as wide a spectrum of opinion as possible.

4. Be prepared to attend and pay the registration fee for any conferences or seminars of high quality dealing with the subject. The investment in time and money is worth it.

5. Put together as professional a program as possible. The new audiences are likely to be less forgiving of amateur presentations in comparison with a familiar audience that has been unable to read your visuals for decades.

6. If your program is successful be prepared for the recognition of expertise in a new area and all the commitments that this may bring.

This last point is important because it may result in new responsibilities being thrust upon you. In our case we have now been called upon to serve as technical staff to our governor's commission considering reform of utility regulation and also serve as a technical resource to a joint industry and utility group attempting to come to agreement on reforms before measures are thrust upon them through the political process.

By now you should recognize that most of what we have said can also be applied to programs we undertake in areas where we believe that we have background and familiarity. It is just that we are not subject to the same pressure of raw panic as when we are convinced we are well-grounded in a subject — even though we might not be. The more thorough approach to unfamiliar issues should probably be followed for those with which we are more familiar.

If we are going to provide education that meets critical needs for our clientele, it is important that we be willing to do the homework necessary to undertake public policy education even if we are not previously well-grounded in the subject matter area for an important issue.