

THE CASE FOR ADVOCACY IN EXTENSION PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION

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Verne House makes the case for the classic, formal public policy education model, the model that involves identifying options and describing their likely consequences. I have no problem with that model as far as it goes. Indeed, the use of the model may be vital as a discipline for practitioners of policy analysis. However, I believe that unless public policy educators go beyond the confines of that formal model they will fall short of their potential for engaging audiences and stimulating the sort of critical thinking that individual citizens must do to fulfill their citizenship responsibilities.

My line of argument runs as follows: An intellectually honest policy analyst who has carefully studied the issue is entitled to an informed opinion, and it strains credibility to deny that such a policy analyst does not have one. Without credibility, the public policy educator is doomed. Moreover, opinions are pedagogically useful because they engage the attention of an audience better than a dry, detached presentation.

This argument rests on three propositions:

The Informed Judgment Proposition

The first proposition I wish to advance is that policy analysts, by virtue of their study of an issue, are entitled to an opinion, or informed judgment. If an analyst is intellectually honest and has done his or her homework, that informed judgment is itself information for others who lack the time or skills to study issues in depth. To fail to share these opinions is to deprive citizens of inputs that can be useful in the performance of their civic responsibilities.

Such a proposition is almost heretical for many extension economists. But I did a master's degree in history. Like most graduate students, those in history are usually put through a course in methodology. My instructor in historiography was Bell Wiley, one of the legendary figures in the study of the American Civil War. Wiley taught that if historians did their job well, they knew more about the subject than anyone else and were in a unique position to reach informed opinions. As scholars they had an obligation to share those

opinions, not just with fellow scholars but with anyone interested in the subject, particularly if their investigations were supported out of public funds.

Like historians, professional public policy specialists immerse themselves in greater depth and detail in the materials related to public policy issues than most lay citizens can afford to do. That is what they are paid to do, often out of public funds. It is to be expected that analysts will emerge from the immersion with certain opinions about which of many possible opinions is likely to be best or at least which are the worst choices and why. Providing those opinions are based on an intellectually honest approach to the subject matter, citizens deserve the benefit of those informed opinions no less than the patients of a physician deserve his or her informed prognosis of their condition.

The Credibility Proposition

Even if one rejects the proposition that the public is entitled to know the informed opinions of those whom they pay to study public policy issues, it strains credibility for public policy educators to pretend that they do not have any opinions. An educator is worthless without credibility. Being up front and open about opinions is essential to maintaining the credibility that public policy educators must have to be effective.

The audiences which a public policy educator must try to reach are not made up of fools. Especially in America, they are made up of citizens who seem to be increasingly skeptical about the objectivity of so-called experts. It may be very difficult for citizens to accept that the public policy educator does not have his or her own agenda.

And why should they not be skeptical? Intuitively, lay citizens know that few among us have the ability to be perfectly objective. Indeed, from a philosophical perspective, perfect objectivity may be impossible, and from a practical standpoint, it is almost surely impossible. I will have more to say on this subject in the coda. But one simply cannot obtain the energy and resources needed to identify and evaluate all possible options. A whole range of options judged by some standard to be infeasible or culturally unacceptable must be discarded as “non-starters.”

Since most ordinary people, at least most that I know, have a difficult time accepting the fact that a public policy analyst does not have a point of view, a pretense of objectivity undermines the credibility of the public policy educator and is counterproductive. It can cause audiences simply to turn the presentation off. It can cause members of the audience to be distracted away from the message of the educator as they attempt to figure out where the educator is coming from, what his or her hidden agenda may be. Better to be up front about one's own values, preferences and recommendations, with the

clear understanding that anyone who cares to challenge the position being advocated is welcome (even encouraged) to do so.

The Pedagogic Proposition

My final proposition is that having an explicit opinion and advocating a specific approach can be pedagogically useful, particularly in oral presentations. There is an old story, so familiar that it need not be repeated here, about the farmer regularly beginning each work day by hitting a mule in the head with a two-by-four to get its attention. There is no way to do public policy education unless the educator gets the audience's attention. Advocacy is one way of hitting a potential audience in the head to get its attention.

The detached presentation of options and ramifications can be dry and boring. Advocating a point of view poses a challenge to the educator to convince and a challenge to the audience to dispute. That conflict between the presenter and the audience, properly managed, introduces passion and drama into a presentation; and in a society increasingly conditioned by television to demand drama, it allows the educator to introduce some spice into what otherwise is often so bland as to be ignored. The public policy educator who is ignored is socially useless.

Caveats, Qualifications, and Conclusions

Am I arguing that the policy educator's traditional model of options and ramifications be abandoned entirely? Certainly not. As I indicated above, use of the model as a way to discipline policy analysis is very important. For some audiences and in some types of presentations—particularly with written materials—it remains an appropriate way to do public policy education.

I would agree that an intellectually honest approach to public policy education requires that all the major options explicitly be noted and fairly considered. Indeed, in using an advocacy approach, there are great advantages to setting out the alternatives and then eliminating each one by one to show why the position being advocated is arguably the best choice among the available options.

I concede that some persons will be turned off by advocacy, particularly if it is in support of a point of view they find objectionable. But those persons often have their minds made up anyway and they are beyond the potential reach of public policy educators. I concede as well that some public policy educators, by virtue of their personalities and capabilities, are simply unsuited to practice an advocacy approach to public policy education. Regardless of how brilliant one may be as an analyst, if you are bland, boring and inarticulate, if you are uncomfortable with conflict or unsure of your own values, if you are arrogant, humorless or dogmatic, the advocacy approach is not for you.

Yet I believe that extension public policy education has suffered of late because timidity and political cowardice is provided respectable cover by the tenets of logical positivism that were embraced by economists a generation or so ago. I believe that by ducking our responsibility to advocate and defend what our analysis convinces us to be the best way to go, by avoiding criticism through blandness and the pretense of detached objectivity, we have failed those who we were supposed to serve. As George McDowell says: We have told audiences what they want to hear (or told them nothing much at all) rather than what they need to hear, and extension is headed for extinction as a result.

Advocacy in public policy education will not save extension, but it can begin to facilitate a re-engagement on the part of extension with ordinary people who expect those experts employed to be their servants to have the courage of their convictions, to be open and candid in their presentations, to defend their positions against vigorous attack and, most importantly, to be truthful, genuine and human in their treatment of those who depend upon them for information. Advocacy can put some sizzle back into our work, and perhaps—just perhaps—let us reach audiences that are not now being reached.

Coda: Cultural Values and Unexamined Presumptions

It is important to understand that the options and consequences model that House defends is not value neutral. It is, in fact, a legacy of Progressivist ideology which, in turn, is an offshoot of rational humanism. Rational humanism is based on the proposition that human beings using the rational powers of their minds can discover all truth, a proposition that in itself is vehemently rejected by many who come out of religious traditions wherein ultimate truth is obtainable only by divine revelation. The public choice models which are offered as an alternative to the Progressivist approach to public policy analysis also are derived from rational humanism approaches to the search for truth and share the same unexamined presumptions.

What many of us innocently take as nothing more than an analytical aid, the model of rational man motivated solely by self interest, is taken by some as a subtle sanctioning of a culture organized around hedonism and materialism. The central model of positivist economic analysis—methodological individualism—is a cultural affront to a significant segment of American society. In its nonjudgmental detachment, it is seen as certainly amoral and godless and sometimes dangerously immoral.

Philosophically, there is no neutral ground that a public policy analyst-educator might occupy to gain a value-free perspective on options and consequences. As a practical matter, lack of such neutral ground mattered little so long as there was some cultural ground common to all segments of the society, some fundamental set of cul-

tural values embraced through a social consensus. Throughout much of our history, most Americans, with the significant exceptions of the indigenous aboriginal peoples and African-Americans, shared a cultural outlook shaped by the Judeo-Christian civilization of western Europe. So long as such common ground existed, public policy analysis and education could be premised upon a consensus about fundamental values and achieve neutrality within a given cultural framework.

But it is debatable whether there is any cultural tradition common to all significant segments of contemporary American society. The growing populations of Asian Americans have brought with them cultural traditions and values drawn from Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religious heritages once almost unknown in America. The growing Hispanic population, while influenced by the Christian values of Catholicism, has been shaped by a culture drawing heavily from Native American and African traditions. Similarly, African-Americans have cultural traditions that fuse Christianity and African outlooks. Rational humanism cannot bridge these differences because it requires that some of the most fundamental tenets of some of these religions be rejected.

If there is no common cultural ground, no consensus of cultural values, there is no public policy analysis that, when taken apart and examined with regard to its fundamental presumptions, will not be controversial, even offensive to some segments of the population. Lack of such a consensus on values has profound implications for policy analysis paid for by tax monies in a state in which there is a constitutional injunction to maintain a strict separation between church and state. Those implications are too complex and subtle to be examined properly here. But if all policy analysis must proceed either from an outlook derived from a philosophy of rational humanism, which at least denies a role for a supernatural divinity, or from an outlook derived from one of the religious traditions, and if that policy analysis is officially sanctioned by support from tax dollars, it must inevitably breach the wall of separation of church and state. Hence the constitutionality of the very act of public policy extension education is sooner or later likely to be questioned.