

LIMITS OF PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION

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This session had its origin last year in Omaha when Alan Hahn presented an overview of eleven public policy education projects funded by the Kellogg Foundation (Hahn, et al.). Hahn described the objectives and the approaches to policy education and reported that most had struggles dealing with the line between education and advocacy. These struggles were quite overt and recognized in those projects which had advocacy organizations as major coalition partners. In the projects with extension as the predominant player there was also tension, but it was less obvious and not well recognized. While those extension-led projects were in agreement that neutrality was the appropriate approach, there was disagreement in most projects about what constituted neutrality. The nonextension coalition members and other observers suggested that extension was not as unbiased as they claimed or thought themselves to be.

Hahn argued that the conflicts were not about education versus advocacy, but what range of alternatives or viewpoints was being presented and what was left out. It is clearly possible for a project to selectively present a set of alternatives that would lead most people to come to a particular position. Thus, Hahn says, the question is more about *balance* versus *bias*.

Another issue in public policy education is the selection of the target audience. Only one of the Kellogg projects openly acknowledged empowerment as a major objective. Three of the eleven placed any emphasis on targeting audiences whose interests and perspectives were poorly represented. In discussion following Hahn's presentation, there was some disagreement among the conference participants about whether empowerment is an appropriate objective of extension public policy education.

This is not a minor issue. If we select as the target audience one or more groups with a major stake in the policy outcome who also have a relatively narrow set of interests, it is likely that the range of alternatives and consequences deemed feasible by the audience will be more limited than it would be if a broader set of interests were included in the audience. Is this education or advocacy? Is it balanced or biased?

If you agree with House that education is human development, then what is our educational responsibility to seek out and involve audiences who otherwise have little or no access to the policy process to register their interests and preferences? Depending on your answer, is this education or advocacy? Is it balanced or biased?

To summarize Hahn's observations, he said: "Our research has led us to wonder if *balance or fairness* is not a more useful standard than nonadvocacy. Regardless of whether public affairs educators advocate or adhere to the neutrality model, should the foremost consideration be a serious effort

1. to identify as full a range of perspectives on the relevant issues as possible,
2. to remain open to new definitions of balance as additional perspectives come to light, and
3. to ensure that each perspective is given fair treatment?

Should neutrality be rejected as unfair if it covers only a partial range of perspectives? Is advocacy irresponsible if it fails to acknowledge and make sure that learners understand the advocated position's weaknesses, uncertainties, and opposing viewpoints? Is special assistance to people with poorly represented interests and perspectives defensible on grounds of balance, with the correction of serious power imbalances understood as a prerequisite for fairness and the mutual understanding of all points of view on an issue?" (Hahn, p. 31).

Also at last year's conference, I made a presentation that suggested the need to go beyond the alternatives-consequences approach on some issues. I argued that presenting the information was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. The educational role in public policy education should strive to reach understanding among all relevant interest groups about the interests and preferences of each other and the reasons why.

I also said that conflict resolution and interest-based negotiation on some issues may require the educator to remain an integral part of the process all the way through to decisions.

Otto Doering, in an unpublished paper earlier this year, asks if there is still a constructive role for public policy education (Doering). He argues persuasively that there is less interest in, and impact from, traditional public policy education programs than there was even a decade ago. He attributes this to the fact that more centralized decision making and government professionals have taken over much of the policy process leaving mostly lobbying and demanding services as remaining citizen roles.

Otto does call, however, for increased policy education on certain issues on which the local citizen still has discretion, either because

the issue is new or a full-fledged client/service relationship from government has not yet become fully developed.

He also goes further to say we should be advocates for citizen involvement in civic affairs. That means programs in which the primary goal is to encourage people to become actively involved in politics and public policy. Michael Briand this morning agreed when he said, "Education should teach politics as well as policy." The Family Community Leadership (FCL) program has this as a major goal, but very few long-time extension public policy education people have been involved. FCL has, instead, drawn on a new cadre from home economics and community development specialists and county agents.

This morning we have heard three excellent presentations. The defending, i.e., traditional, position on the neutral alternatives consequences approach was given by House. He cited six milestones, one of which is still to evolve in this decade.

The challenging position by Hite argues that the nominally objective public policy education model is a useful disciplinary device, but it straightjackets policy educators and provides respectable cover for timidity and political cowardice.

Where do you stand? The discussion is now up to you.

REFERENCES

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