

INCREASING OUR EFFECTIVENESS AS PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATORS

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How can we be more effective as public policy educators? This question poses a fundamental challenge for all of us. It is one of the key questions that thinking about policy process models raises for me. It is a question we should continually keep in the forefront of our thinking as we go about our work.

Increasing our effectiveness requires that we understand the process through which public policy is made and implemented and the role and relative importance of information and education in that process. Increasing our effectiveness also requires that we understand how various participants in the policy process perceive policy educators and that we adapt our educational methods to accommodate these perceptions.

These latter two issues are a continuing concern to me. Perceptions of the different participants in the policy process are important because these perceptions have implications for what we can do, how we can do it and how what we do is received. My concern about how perceptions affect how we do public policy education causes me to search for more effective educational methods.

I am going to share with you some thoughts about perceptions of policy educators in the policy process and suggest a method of policy education for your consideration. This method is not really a new method, but it is one that perhaps policy educators should consider giving more emphasis. My thinking about this method has been stimulated by a recent interesting and provocative book by Donald A. Schon titled *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*.

These thoughts and my suggestion are grounded in my view that the public policy process is an adversarial setting in which competing interests are involved in political contention over issues, policy solutions and implementation strategies (Schon, p. 350). They are pertinent primarily to those situations in which policy makers, legis-

lative staff persons and agency employees at any level of government are the audiences for policy education programs.

Policy Educators' and Policy Makers' Perceptions

As public policy educators, most of us have a clear, straightforward view of our role in the policy process. The prevailing view is that we provide research-based information and education on public issues, policy alternatives for dealing with those issues and the consequences of those alternatives. Our goal is to better inform the debate and the decisions on public issues.

The perceptions of policy makers or politicians, however, may be different. First, given a policy process that involves competing interests involved in political contention over issues and policies, policy makers may perceive the policy expert or educator as trying to further a particular point of view. Speaking from his experience as a professional economist and Minnesota state legislator, Brandl argues that economists who provide information and education to policy makers are, in fact, often perceived this way by those policy makers (p. 350). When this perception holds, the influence that economists, or, more generally, policy experts and educators, wield on policy making suffers.

At the 1986 National Public Policy Education Conference, Browne discussed the policy making process and the 1985 farm bill. He pointed out that the most detailed and analytical responses to the farm bill proposals came from academically oriented agricultural experts (p. 149). These experts participated in the farm bill debates primarily by supplying analyses of important policy issues through publications and conferences (Browne, p. 150). While Browne does not say it explicitly, he implies that at least some of these academics, perhaps a large number, involved in this analyzing, publishing and conferencing saw themselves as taking part in a public policy education effort. According to Browne, what was unusual about these experts was the degree to which they were mobilized in opposition to the nonmarket orientation of existing farm policy (p. 149).

Many public policy educators, at least those who attend the National Public Policy Education Conference, have economics as their core academic discipline. All disciplines, but perhaps economics more than most, have an implicit ethical stance or conception of the public good that can easily come across as a favored perspective (Brandl, p. 348-350). This perception, whether accurate or not, of the policy expert or educator trying to further a particular point of view just like any other competing interest, will limit opportunities for and the effectiveness of public policy education efforts.

The perceptions of policy makers may differ from those of policy educators in another way. As policy educators, we see ourselves as

willing and able to help policy makers learn about policy choices and consequences. When we come to the policy process and to policy makers visibly wearing the educator's mantle and operating as teachers and professors, those policy makers we are trying to help may very likely find our behavior patronizing (Brandl, p. 350). If we are perceived as patronizing, interpersonal barriers are created that limit the receptivity of policy makers to our educational efforts and thus limit our effectiveness.

For the public policy educator, the first step toward effectiveness involves understanding his or her own perceptions of education and policy educators in the policy process, policy makers' perceptions of policy education and policy educators, and how these perceptions match up. The second step involves developing and utilizing educational methods that best accommodate the perceptions of policy makers.

The Policy Educator as Reflective Practitioner

Schon argues that professionals, whether economists, engineers, biologists or educators, can increase their effectiveness by operating as reflective practitioners. The reflective practitioner is the professional expert who consciously reflects on what he or she is doing while it is being done in light of the particular cultural, interpersonal, political and social circumstances of a given practice situation. This reflection-in-action allows the professional practitioner to learn from others party to the situation, to incorporate the knowledge of others into discussion and analysis of the situation, and to adapt his or her discussion and activities on the spot to more responsively address the issues at hand.

Schon poses this reflection-in-action model of professional practice as an alternative to the prevailing model of technical rationality. In this latter model, professional practice involves "instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique" (Schon, p. 21). Professionals practicing through this model rely primarily on the theories of their academic discipline and the techniques of basic and applied science to solve concrete problems (Schon, p. 27).

The problem, as Schon sees it, is that professionals operating through this model of technical rationality do not give enough emphasis to problem setting, "the process by which we define the decisions to be made, the ends to be achieved, and the means which may be chosen" (p. 40). In the real world, private and public problems do not present themselves neatly and clearly. Instead, "they must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain" (Schon, p. 40). While problem setting is necessary for technical problem solving, it is not itself a technical problem (Schon, p. 40). Problem setting is a creative process

wherein the parties to a situation define what will be dealt with in what context.

Professional practice under the model of technical rationality is most applicable to narrowly defined problems of technical interest; it is less applicable to those practice situations that are complex, uncertain, unique and value-laden (Schon, p. 42). These are the situations requiring problem setting, and the situations usually of greatest concern to most people. These are also the situations that are the grist for public policy making.

The reflection-in-action model requires a particular professional-client relationship and suggests a particular role for professional experts in the policy process. For us as public policy educators, it suggests a particular model of public policy education.

The relationship between the reflective practitioner and the client is grounded in mutual recognition that each party's knowledge and experience has relevance for dealing with the problem situation (Schon, p. 295-297). The reflective practitioner and the client engage in reflective conversations, testing each other's ideas in light of the circumstances of the problem situation. In this process, they jointly explore and clarify the relevance and limits of their knowledge in setting the problem, clarifying the ends and determining means. It is a relationship wherein the reflective practitioner and the client join as equal partners in inquiring into the problem for which the client needs help.

Following the reflection-in-action model, professionals, or in our case, public policy educators, do not participate in the policy process as "experts" or "educators." Rather, they participate as equals with other participants, and they facilitate reflective discussions and analyses of public issues, public policy alternatives and the consequences of these alternatives among all participants. They offer their ideas, expertise and experience, and they incorporate the ideas, expertise and experience of others in setting problems, clarifying ends and determining policy directions.

Schon argues that this reflection-in-action model can increase the relevance and effectiveness of the professional practitioner in private and public problem solving. I believe this model can increase our effectiveness as public policy educators because it recognizes the knowledge of others as well as our own knowledge as policy experts and educators. It acknowledges the multiple truths in public policy debates. It also provides a mechanism for those who hold these multiple truths to learn from each other and to use increased mutual understanding as a basis for making and implementing public policy.

The professional posture this reflection-in-action model implies seems less likely to be patronizing to policy makers than the stance of the expert willing and able to provide information, analyses and education on alternative public policies and their possible conse-

quences. The reflection-in-action model as a model of public policy education practice is one we should consider as we work to increase our effectiveness as educators in the public policy process.

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