AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO POLICY EDUCATION

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Three recent news reports describe anecdotally the position of educators in our society today and, incidentally, point up some of the most serious dilemmas educators face.

Report #1: In an age of technology, what could be more impressive than a statement from a scientist that he has statistical proof, with fewer than five chances in a hundred of error, that differences in salary between a group of male faculty members and a group of female faculty members could be attributable only to intentional sex discrimination on the part of their university?

According to press reports, Judge Lee P. Gagliardi of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York was so impressed with such statistics that he evidently required no corroborative evidence or background material to rule on a case involving the City University of New York (*Melani v. Board of Higher Education of the City of New York*).

In so doing, he applied a theory that had previously been uttered but apparently never acted upon by the courts, namely, that statistics alone, without any other evidence of intent or bias, can prove intentional discrimination. Judge Gagliardi ruled that C.U.N.Y. had discriminated against female faculty members and administrators for 15 years by paying them less than men doing the same work (1).

Report #2: Theodor D. Sterling, a professor of computing science at Simon Fraser University, examined scientific studies used in government policy decisions and charged that scientists do not always contribute "unbiased and factual information" while serving as experts in regulatory matters and that they sometimes "shade" their presentations for selfish or other reasons.

In a speech before the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Prof. Sterling contended that experts are seldom held accountable for errors or omissions in briefs and reports that might form the basis for key policy decisions. He believes that "scientists who deliberately misrep-

resent their research findings to further the interests of their employers or institutions should be barred from participating in public-policy debates." (3)

Report #3: Participants in the International Symposium on Microbial Ecology at Michigan State University discussed the ethical problems of genetic engineering. Many of them disagreed with Martin Alexander, a Cornell University scientist, who maintained that "creation of new and possibly dangerous organisms in the laboratory should be regulated at least to some extent by government."

Alexander added, "We do not have enough evidence. . .to say that the probability is absolutely zero that we have no basis for concern (about genetic engineering). . . . Some type of regulatory involvement will reduce the probability (of danger) very markedly. (2)

Even allowing for media oversimplification and exaggeration, these newspaper accounts point to some attitudes that have serious implications for the role educators play in public policy decisions.

With respect to the first news article, all of us know educators who provide statistical "proofs" for the formulation of public policies without providing critical information on the compilation of the statistics or without taking into account the societal context of the research. Yet any of us who have ever worked with statistics or done research know that such sterile proofs, inert ideas, if you will, are at the very least useless, and often downright harmful.

As far as the second article is concerned, again we are all aware that scientific research is frequently undertaken and used for the good of special interests. And that is something we cannot avoid doing, because we start with theories that are grounded to values. Therefore, it is critical that we understand and admit what the special interests are, that we be open and aboveboard about our value system, and thus allow potential users to compensate for the skewed results.

And finally, do educators need to be regulated by government or someone else for the good of humanity? It is not necessary to single out educators for such monitoring. All ideas that are presented to society for its use should be subject to cultural and moral regulation by society at large. In fact, of course, they are. The validity of ideas put forth into social life will always be put to the larger test of social checks and balances. Academic freedom only guarantees our right to pursue knowledge and utter our findings. No one, after all, is obligated to use the researcher's product.

But what do these news articles and my comments on them have to do with policy education? Simply this — the issues raised by these articles have critical implications for all of us. In fact, these issues can be combined into one primary question: What is the proper and ethical

role for the scientist-educator-teacher and our modern universities to play in the formulation of public policy?

I am going to give you my view, but in so doing, I will quote from the positions of others who have, over the years, thought long and hard about such matters. In short, my position is not new, not necessarily only mine. But it is, I submit, high in merit and worthy of application. It is a model that can bring great satisfaction to the users and benefits to society at large.

Basic to the model are three propositions, the first of which is that an idea on how to solve a problem is essential in the formation of social public policy.

The source of ideas is not a critically important factor. In our society ideas abound. Politicians have ideas, government workers have ideas, citizens have ideas, and even university professors and university extension workers have been known to have ideas. But an idea on how to solve a problem formulated in a theoretical vacuum is not much use. Alfred North Whitehead maintains that ". . . ideas which are not utilized are positively harmful."(5, p.15). I would broaden that assertion and add that ideas which are utilized tend to be imaginative and persuasively advocated.

Use of an idea, is this the key? For many scientists and educators the concept of utilization is troublesome because it departs from the pure science and moves toward the metaphysical or value judgment. As "scientists" in today's universities, we pride ourselves on our sophisticated but detached way of looking at facts. But when called upon to recommend how the facts could be used to solve actual problems, we become very hesitant and withdraw from the scene. We believe our responsibility is to research facts and record the results in an unbiased and valueless manner — as if that were even possible; to record and publish the findings in such a way as to inform.

In so doing, we discard our responsibility for our own ideas. We isolate ourselves and our intellects; we become the elite. And a very phony elitism it is, too. For with that kind of attitude, it is not surprising that we are uncomfortable putting our information — our ideas — to the test of utilization. But if we give our ideas and our research away without ever assuming the responsibility for testing them in the marketplace, so to speak, we have only fulfilled a part of our mission as educators. Furthermore, it is cowardly to assume that someone else should always implement and use our ideas. That is hiding behind ivied walls with a vengeance.

The second proposition in the model is that if an idea is to be utilized, it must be proved.

Scientific proof of an idea is done either by experimentation or by logic. And an interesting right is granted specifically to research professors within the university, a right which lays a responsibility on

these people beyond that of other researchers. Society has granted the university and its researchers a legitimate "social license to be wrong." It is in the university where first-level experimentation with the use of radical new ideas takes place. Because they are presumed to be seeking the "truth," university researchers do not lose their credibility when each and every idea does not "prove out." Private researchers in their well-funded and ultrasophisticated laboratories do not have such license, nor does anyone else. It is uniquely to research personnel within university settings that the license to be wrong is granted.

Because research faculty have society's permission to be wrong, they have an even stronger obligation than others to use their proven ideas for the benefit of society. They have an obligation to apply their values to their truths, to prescribe use formats, and to predict the impact that the application of such prescriptions will have on society.

But in the use of the idea there is an additional truth, a truth determined by cultural values and experience of potential users of the idea. It is not essential that these cultural or experiential proofs be established when the idea is first introduced. Logical or experimental proofs from a respectable researcher, educator, or statesperson are sufficient evidence to begin with, so long as we understand and accept that the ultimate test of truth rests with the users of the idea. If researchers disengage at this phase of the process, they deny themselves data critical to their search for truth; they forego a significant validation test.

It is the users who offer an ethical judgment on an idea, a judgment that there is a good reason to adopt and use the idea, because it would genuinely reduce conflict. It is a judgment that the idea is worthy of adoption, because it will contribute to life a deeper and more consistent satisfaction than currently exists. In short, it is users who finally determine that an idea is worthy of pursuit. They do so by adopting and using the idea (4, p.223). Users contribute the common sense necessary to the implementation of a good idea.

And where is the link between educators espousing this proposition and the makers of public policy? Public policymakers, after all, face the problem of constantly making decisions surrounded by multitudes of advisors presenting conflicting ideas, demanding agreements, and issuing injunctions. Policymakers must decide which ideas to respond to and which to reject. They activate a process of ethical reasoning and try to achieve, in Toulmin's words, ". . .the harmonious satisfaction of desires and interests." (4, p.223).

Policymakers generally approve an idea for action in accordance with an established maxim of conduct within the existing moral code. Educators whose ideas tend to be adopted add their own ethical judgments to their facts. They couch their ideas in a way to have them perceived as good ideas, worthy of adoption and pursuit.

When, as occasionally happens, an idea is proposed that critically challenges the current morality of society, the *status quo*, it should be the advocates of the idea, the researchers and educators, who bring evidence of the way things could be if the idea were adopted as policy. If the advocates are committed to their ideas and can convince those who can implement the ideas of their value, what can be done becomes what ought to be done, and in fact, what is done.(4, p.223) None of this may be easy, but without the attempt, without as many attempts as necessary, educators and researchers indeed relegate themselves to the category of "useless bores."

In discussing the link between common sense and science, between policymakers and educators, if you will, Whitehead says, "You may polish up common sense, you may contradict it in detail, and you may surprise it. But ultimately your whole task is to satisfy it. . . . neither common sense nor science can proceed with their task of thought organization without departing in some respect from the strict consideration of what is actual in experience." (5, p.110).

The third proposition is that for an idea to be utilized it must be imaginatively and persistently supported, both by its advocates (the educators) and their institutions (the universities).

For an idea to be adopted and utilized, it is necessary, but not sufficient, that a committed advocate plead the case. But if the advocate is a professor or other educator, institutional support becomes a factor. The role of educators in the formation of public policy is, to be sure, a function of their individual expertise. But this role is also, willy nilly, a function of the office an educator-advocate holds within the university and the degree to which the idea represents the position of the university.

This is a most difficult position for either the typical educator or the typical institution of higher education to accept. Both are much more comfortable when a professor certifies only a personal commitment to the idea and does not claim to be representing the position of the institution itself. That is, in fact, the policy of my university.

What we must understand, though, is that this policy is only binding on personnel within the university. Few people outside the university even understand this position, much less accept it. Most people who are exposed to an idea generating from a university person are neither able nor willing to separate the educator from the university. This phenomenon, of course, is not limited to educators; it also holds true for persons who have positions in all the social institutions and organizations of our society, for members of labor unions, chambers of commerce, or spokespersons for the Moral Majority. It is a fact of life, whether justified or not, that the influence and power wielded by people depends in large measure on their official positions and affiliations. The obvious corollary of this fact, then, is that the organizational units

of our society, not the independent actions of their members, generally bring about the utilization of ideas.

Under these conditions, then, I maintain that universities have an obligation, both to society and to their own integrity, to foster and support the ideas that emanate from their faculties. I do not propose, of course, that universities throw the full force of their prestige or their resources behind every single idea a faculty member has. But I do believe that universities must become involved in public policy actions and support their members who choose to expand their academic enterprise to the public policy environment. Whitehead puts it well:

> The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes (5, p.97).

What, then, is the approach to policy education that I advocate? I advocate an approach in which the adoption and utilization of ideas occurs.

I advocate an approach in which the ideas emerging from our universities are deliberately fostered and, with clarity and direction, are ethically entered into public policy decisionmaking in such a manner as to be considered and not rejected.

I advocate an approach in which faculty take a stand to recommend solutions to societal problems, to interact to the fullest measure possible in the utilization of university-generated ideas that have university-empowered tests of the truth of the ideas, and to do so with full university backing and support.

I advocate a public policy making approach in which the final test of truth and worth of an idea rests with the social organizations and their members that adopt and use the ideas.

The role of universities and their faculties in public policy, then, is not a matter of choice; they do, in fact, help make public policy. And perhaps of all the purposes they serve, the highest is that of absorbing the uncertainty of change. The point is that they should do it consciously and with a sense of commitment and direction. We should not carry out these responsibilities in a so-called "value-free" and sterile way. Let us act with imagination and hope. The future is ours to make.

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