

PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION—WHOM DO WE TEACH?

*James C. Barron, Extension Economist
Washington State University*

A strong case can be made for the proposition that the greatest danger to the survival of civilization today is not atomic warfare, not environmental pollution, not the population explosion, not the depletion of natural resources, and not any of the other contemporary crises, but the underlying cause of them all—the accelerating obsolescence of man. (Malcolm Knowles, in *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*, 1970.)

Given limited teaching resources it is important to maximize the output of public policy education by teaching people who will utilize the information and analysis generated by the program. More care is generally devoted to refinement of the teaching technique or the quality of the subject matter material than to defining or understanding the audience. There can be no doubt, however, that the best prepared programs of policy educators will go astray if they are aimed at inappropriate clientele groups.

There is a bona fide market for public policy education although the demand signals are often ambiguous and there are few acceptable measures of supply. The market consists of many consumers acting both as individuals and as clientele groups. Extension is but one of many producers. The prices paid directly by consumers are not difficult to measure; they consist of time and travel costs. Their indirect costs are taxes to support public educational agencies. The production costs of Extension are similarly straightforward, but there is little understanding of the terms of exchange between the consumer and the producer. How does the consumer relate his direct and indirect costs to the service he receives when he has no control over the price he pays or the conditions of exchange?

An additional economic phenomenon distorts the market picture. Nearly all consumers “buy” education for at least two reasons. First, it is a consumption good in the sense that people generally tend to be more satisfied by knowing more than by knowing less. Second, learning may be viewed as an investment for the future, either for improved economic status or as a means to further learning. Policy educators are usually unaware (because the consumers do not themselves know) what the distribution of education is or should be between consumption and investment.

It is important to point out that successful public policy education results from interaction between the consumer and the producer to define problems and educational follow-up. The educational producer cannot rely on advertising to attract consumers in the same way a soap or toothpaste seller does. The changing nature of policy education programs results from new concerns by traditional consumers or the entrance of new consumers into the market, for example, resource preservationists as well as resource developers. The successful policy educator is constantly alert to such concerns just as the market researcher looks for new demands.

OFFICIAL PRONOUNCEMENTS

Extension has over the years accumulated a formidable set of documents, reports, and directives relating to programs and audiences. I cite only four which could be expected to be most pertinent: Extension Management Information System (1973), Scope report (1958), Community Resource Development report (1967), and *A People and a Spirit* (1968).

The Washington version of the Extension Management Information System lists 26 audiences which may be reported by extension workers. Nearly one-third are people within the university itself. For the others it is easy to find a category into which any individual or group will fit because the categories are broadly defined to be all inclusive. The purpose of EMIS is not for program planning, however, but for reporting ex post.

The Scope report set forth goals and directions for Extension, but in retrospect the clientele groups listed seem severely limited. They were: (1) farm families, (2) nonfarm rural residents, (3) urban residents, (4) farm commodity and related organizations, and (5) agricultural supply and marketing firms. The report did not go into detail about audience priorities or give much guidance for policy educators. In fact, the 1959 follow-up report did not mention audiences.

The ECOP report on Community Resource Development is more specific. It suggested three key targets for educational programs: (1) groups involved in making and implementing decisions about the community, (2) key individuals who influence or make decisions relevant to the community, and (3) individuals and groups affected by and participating in decisions made regarding the community. The extension clientele in each state will depend on problems and opportunities specific to each area. In practice the extension worker may also define his own audience by virtue of his interests, attitudes, personality, etc.

For someone seeking wide latitude, the ultimate expression was reached in *A People and a Spirit*, which said, "Cooperative Extension has a legitimate role in helping people solve problems, wherever they may live—on farms, in the villages, in the open country, in the central city, or in the suburb." A few pages later it is asserted that "public affairs education is concerned with educating all citizens," not a very useful guide to the educator.

The net result of these reports is to provide very limited help to a prospective public policy educator. To include everyone begs the question. Perhaps this is just as it should be since the audience should provide some advice on what the educational program will be. Therefore, audiences or clientele groups tend to define themselves, assuming educators are alert to demand signals. For community development programs, a certain geographic area and specific individuals and groups will be appropriate, but some broad public affairs issues will have state or national audiences. Even in the latter case, however, it is foolish to think that everybody will be educated or is even educable.

HOW DO PEOPLE LEARN?

People learn in mysterious ways. Extension practitioners often have an intuitive understanding of some forces and factors that influence learning, but these are generally far removed from the conceptual models used by sociologists and educational researchers. To compound the problem, most of the research on learning behavior is aimed at children rather than adults.

A major point to remember about the adult consumer in our educational market is that he is a volunteer. There are no attendance rules working in our favor, nor are there any rewards we can offer the student as an inducement for his effort. Since he is a volunteer, he can afford to be more discriminating about what he will accept, and if the quality does not please him, he is free to leave and seek another producer of education or drop out of the market entirely.

Closely related to the voluntary notion is a difference in orientation to learning between youth and adults. Youth are highly subject centered and assume that the subject matter will someday be useful to them. They are, therefore, more likely than adults to deal in abstractions. Adults, however, are problem centered and seek education to aid them in solving problems. The inherent appeal of the subject matter is less important than the use of the information to answer a question or solve a problem. The implication of these factors for the policy educator is to be alert to prospective

volunteer learners (the consumer) and to focus educational programs on problems germane to the learner.

Psychologists talk about “developmental tasks” in the learning process. At certain stages in life a person faces tasks which, if successfully completed, lead to satisfaction and success with later tasks. There is even evidence that such development takes place among adults, which suggests there are teachable moments when people are more receptive to learning. In early adulthood the developmental tasks relevant to policy education might be getting started in an occupation and beginning to take on civic responsibility. In middle age a different level of civic and social responsibility emerges along with the establishment and maintenance of an economic standard of living. Developing an avocation may also be important.

Thus far we have spoken of consumers of education as a rather homogeneous lot acting in a simple market with two sides—consumer and producer. Alas, it is not that simple! A wide range of roles are played by different people in linking knowledge from its source to the final user. Ronald Havelock at the University of Michigan has named and described some of these roles which serve as links between the researcher and practitioner (Figure 1). In public policy education, we can conceive of the people who play linking roles as a potential audience just as important as the ultimate user or consumer of information. An understanding of these linkages is crucial in defining an audience and preparing educational programs.



FIGURE 1. Filling the knowledge gap.

The *conveyor* is one who takes knowledge from expert sources and carries it to possible users. Knowledge could consist of research findings, concepts, printed matter, or just ideas. Extension specialists and county agents often act as conveyors, but so do bankers, salesmen, reporters, field men, teachers, etc.

The *consultant* assists users in defining problems, seeking resources, and generally facilitates processes of change or innovation. Community resource development programs often feature the consultant role which may be played by a county agent, area or state specialist, or by someone outside Extension. The consultant is a process facilitator more than a teacher of subject matter, but he may act as a guide to subject matter resources.

The *trainer* is a formal teacher conveying a body of knowledge as a package in an organized class situation. As a link in public policy education, this role has been relatively unimportant.

The *leader* provides linkage for knowledge by power or influence in his own group either through example or direction. There are both formal and informal leaders about which policy educators must be concerned. A leader such as an administrator or officer of an organization has significant potential for influencing ideas. Related to the idea of formal leadership is the concept of a "gatekeeper." This is someone who must be passed in order to gain access to a larger group. By legitimizing an idea or an educational program, the leader or gatekeeper opens the communication channels to a potential audience.

An informal leader need not hold an official position of power, but he can influence others by his opinions or his actions. An informal leader may emerge because of some past activity or formal position, and his role can result simply from continued acceptance of his judgment and ideas. Policy educators are well advised to understand something about how informal or opinion leadership is structured because it is not necessarily progressive or objective, two characteristics upon which we usually place high value as educators.

The *innovator* is the first person to adopt an idea or practice. Even though the innovator is actually an early consumer, he can play a linking role to other possible users by his success or as an active proponent of the idea. A caution is in order here for policy education. There is no clear evidence that innovative behavior is consistent from one area to another. The farm practice innovator may not be at all innovative when it comes to public policy issues.

The *defender* is a barrier to change or new ideas. He may not appear to have a linking role, but not all change or new ideas are in all cases good. The defender acts as a screen between the potential consumer and the producer of an idea by seeking greater clarification and evidence before acceptance. This role is important since it is difficult to reverse bad decisions after they are made and implemented. Consider how useful a good defender would have been in the case of the drug, thalidomide. County agents sometimes play this role to the consternation of administrators, specialists, and farm input salesmen.

The *knowledge builder* may be a basic scientist or a lay person who sets out to inform himself about an issue. More of the lay

type are appearing than previously as citizens seek greater involvement in public policy resolution.

The *practitioner* may be the last step before the final user. The teacher, county agent, physician, or minister acts as a practitioner giving advice and counsel. Some practitioners, such as the physician, may be very specialized, while others, such as the county agent, are general.

The *user* is the final consumer who directly utilizes the knowledge, but in some cases he may perform his own linking roles. To do so he must have some prior knowledge of resources and access to them.

The relationship among linking roles is shown in Figure 2. Here it can be observed that the market for education is not confined to the final user but consists of many types of role players in different positions within the social system. The policy educator receives signals from all of these and in turn must work back through one or more on the way to the final consumer. Moreover,

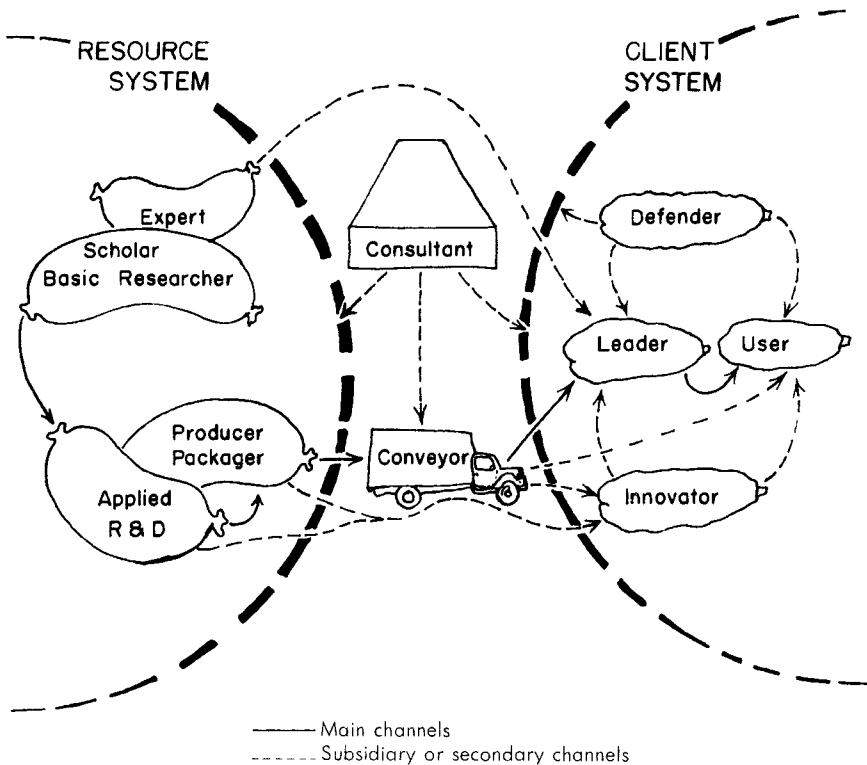


FIGURE 2. Relationship among linking roles.

an individual may perform more than one role. The expert could also be a conveyor, as in the case of the extension specialist. A county agent also performs multiple roles.

CHANGING NATURE OF CLIENTELE GROUPS

This section does not directly follow from the preceding discussion. Rather, it is my own view as an observer and a participant in extending public policy education programs of how extension clientele have changed in the last decade and some comments on future changes.

Traditional Audiences

Some long established audiences for policy education can easily be identified. These are commercial farmers, farm organizations, agribusiness firms, and rural nonfarm residents.

These traditional clients have all been closely tied to production agriculture, and while they will continue to be consumers of public policy education, their relative importance is declining for three reasons. First is the emergence of new groups seeking information on a variety of public issues. Second, the kinds of issues presently concerning agriculture are also of interest to nonfarmers. Third, farmers are declining in absolute as well as relative numbers, and their political influence is also declining.

Over the last decade these factors have brought Extension into contact with new audience groups, and public policy education has broadened its boundaries to reflect changing issues. Community resource development, welfare policy, local government organization and financing, and environmental quality are examples of major programs which have been conducted with new and traditional audiences.

Recent audiences include: local government officials, environmental activists, legislators, community leaders, public agency professionals, and consumer groups. With each group new programs and novel relationships have emerged. In general, the outlook is for continued and perhaps expanded programming for recent audiences.

Even though the list of "whom we teach" has grown rapidly, I believe there are some untapped groups to which Extension will devote more attention in the future.

1. *Youth.* As far as public policy education is concerned, Extension has virtually ignored youth. Their interest in many of the issues discussed above, however, is quite obvious. How this

audience will be reached is not clear. Extension has direct access to 4-H members but has traditionally been more concerned with developing the morals of youth rather than their minds. The market is much broader than 4-H, and some indirect access may be in order.

2. *Teachers*. This group could provide access to youth generally. Extension education materials on policy issues have usually been aimed at the adult user, but perhaps teachers could play the conveyor role described above. Teachers in community colleges, vocational schools, universities, and local public schools are possibilities.

3. *Minority groups*. Both ethnic and economic minorities have generally been bypassed by policy education programs. Agricultural labor is a good example. It is not surprising that low-income people have not been consumers of such education. Provision of food and shelter takes precedence over intellectual pursuits, but the resolution of some public policy issues has an influence on those economic conditions.

4. *Urban residents*. This is not a very precisely defined group, and many of them overlap with others previously identified. The interdependence, economically and socially, of urban and rural people makes it clear that urban audiences will become more important as consumers in our educational market.

CONCLUSION

A burgeoning market for public policy education has emerged over the past ten or fifteen years and shows no signs of tapering off. Extension has been extremely successful in exploiting the market for technical production information in agriculture, but it has only begun to tap the demands for knowledge and analysis of public issues. The rate of change in society is increasing, and the major policy issues now and in the future will be how to adjust individually and collectively to new situations. Extension programs will have to focus on specific clientele groups at teachable moments if they are to have any part in slowing or reversing the obsolescence of man.