

PUBLIC ISSUES EDUCATION AND THE NATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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I must admit, after a quarter of a century of involvement in extension public policy education, both as a student and a practitioner, I am perplexed and confused. Perhaps the “system,” whatever that means, is about to devour us. As the Kansas contact person for the Public Issues Education project, I received a packet of materials headlined, “if issues were alligators.” Well, issues are not alligators, but I fear the “system” is crawling with alligators. Allow me to explain.

Public policy education in the Cooperative Extension System was born in the hatchery of agricultural economists who dealt with price and income programs for family farmers. A well-known model that has stood the test of time was used—the non-advocacy alternative/consequences (A/C) model. It did not espouse a political agenda for the Extension Service and it fully understood that value judgments, not scientific criteria established by the experts in the halls of academe, were the basis for policy decisions. The evolution of the National Public Policy Education Committee (NPPEC) paralleled the development of public policy education.

The record of the traditionalists in this business on farm bill education and the famous *Who Will Control Agriculture* project is exemplary, but beyond that, what have we done? That is a good question. Some may take offense at this accusation and will come forward with some examples, state by state, but the record of the national committee and regional committees, in recent times, is slim. Several of us even tried to revisit the structure-of-agriculture question and received little support. Since I chaired the national committee twice in recent years, I will shoulder a disproportionate share of the blame, but also take the license to be heard.

In our defense, in the North Central Region we attempted to broaden our base and include a home economist from each state on the committee because we could document that they were doing public policy education effectively in family issues, but the directors, in their infinite wisdom, shot us down. They refused to allow an agricultural economist and a home economist from each state to serve on the committee.

Ironically, I spent the first two-thirds of my career trying to convince traditional agriculturalists that we should broaden our base and include natural resource and family issues. Now I find, in an agricultural state such as Kansas, I will spend the remaining years defending the importance of agriculture against those who think it is no longer relevant at a land grant university. But then, every nonadvocacy public policy educator must have at least one cause, internal to the system, to fight for.

The public policy education fraternity within extension, I will argue, created a vacuum by 1980 (for lack of a more appropriate documented date) by our lack of an issue agenda much beyond price and income policy. Along came those whose forte is process rather than content and we began to reinvent the wheel. The alligators got into the swamp and the devouring began. The buzzwords became “issue-based programming.” Was “issue-based programming” designed to serve the needs of the people, our clientele, or was it self-serving and designed to save the system? Many traditionalists in the fraternity were miffed because we thought public policy education *was* issue-based programming. (Many may think the term “fraternity” is sexist, but, remember, the directors would not let us merge with the sorority). Now we have new buzzwords—public issues education.

Barrows, in the introduction to his classic bulletin on public policy education, which the University of Wisconsin is now wisely reprinting, stated, “public policy education is an Extension program that applies the knowledge of the university to public issues and educates citizens to enable them to make better informed policy choices.” In material I received this summer from the University of Wisconsin, it was stated, “public issues education refers to educational programs which have the objective of enhancing the society’s capacity to understand and address issues of widespread concern.”

Materials from the same project contain a question-and-answer section that attempts to explain the difference between regular extension work, public policy education, issue-based programming and public issues education.

What silly games we play. Frankly, the people who pay my salary, the taxpayers of Kansas, either could care less or would be offended.

What our clientele are crying out for is content, subject matter, vigorous analysis, data, statistics, theories, options and tools that will help them understand, formulate positions, provide answers and solve problems while we are debating abstract concepts, definitions and reinventing new terms that confuse. We keep talking process, process, process and the people want content, content, content.

And, as Hahn has so clearly stated on numerous occasions, it takes a balance to effectively do the job.

A personal case in point. I have, for years, conducted an ongoing policy education program in macroeconomic policy. I just finished a series on the Clinton budget. That budget debate desperately needed factual information and content. In preparation, I searched and I searched for the facts—Office of Management and Budget, Congressional Budget Office, Council of Economic Advisors, U.S. Department of Treasury, Democratic Study Group, Senate Budget Committee Minority Staff. Every data set I received was different. None agreed. Process was abundant. Accurate content was impossible to establish. We did, however, provide factual input into the budget debate by using our Farm Management Association data base and providing our Congressional delegation of both parties estimates of the impact of the BTU tax on Kansas farms. They were grateful and are supportive of our extension programs.

Someone once said, people have problems and universities have departments. We traditionalists in this business address problems that fit our discipline and we analyze alternatives with the tools of economists when society demands much more. Another personal case in point. Last winter I testified, along with two other agricultural economists, before the legislature on the Kansas corporate hog farming law. The economics of that issue are rather straight-forward. But, the issue is more than economics. It is social, legal and political. Have we put a team together to infuse education across the spectrum into the issue? No!

The question is frequently asked is the A/C model sufficient or is that the only process tool the educator needs in the “bag of tricks”? No! Networking, empowerment, conflict management, all of these tools, are making valuable contributions and perhaps it is time for us traditionalists to learn some of these. But, I would also argue that the new kids on the block need to learn how to use the A/C model and practice it. I find less and less of that and more and more extension educators who want to have a “politically correct agenda.”

Well, what is my point? Four-fold:

1. We traditionalists are leaving a vacuum!
2. It is time the NPPEC truly broadens its base. Extension education on public policy issues must cut across many disciplines to provide the input citizens need, in the Jeffersonian sense, to make informed decisions.
3. There is room for family issues, national resource issues and, yes, even price and income policy for farmers. There is room for all of us to apply our unique expertise! The record on farm bill issues needs to be replicated on other issues. It is time for some oxygen. Let us get with it!

4. What shall we call it? Public policy education, issue-based programming, public issues education? That's immaterial.

REFERENCES

Barrows, Richard. *Public Policy Education: Key Concepts and Methods*. NCR #203. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison.

***Environmental Policy:
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