

PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES OF PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION LEARNED FROM ELEVEN INNOVATIVE PROJECTS

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Public policies are policies that affect the public, i.e., those policies with significant impacts beyond the entity making a decision.

In a democracy, those affected have a right to a voice in such decisions. Many fail to exercise that voice, however, suffering from lack of interest, unequal resources, failure to see how they're affected or doubt that a fair share of influence is possible.

Because people are affected differently by public issues and have different values, even those who do participate disagree about what should be done.

In the final analysis, in a democracy, the opinion or preference of no particular individual or group matters. What matters is a collective decision, not on what *I* want or what *you* want, but on what *we* want. As Benjamin Barber describes it: "The journey from private opinion to political judgment does not follow a road from prejudice to true knowledge; it proceeds from solitude to sociability" (p. 199). That, in a nutshell, is one thing that makes the coalition requirement so interesting in a cluster of eleven "innovative public policy education projects" funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in collaboration with Farm Foundation.

The Eleven Projects

The eleven projects are extremely diverse. In fact, it often seems that a coalition is the only thing they have in common, and not even that is true for every project. The cluster includes projects that have:

1. Developed a curriculum on human nutrition, world food supply and the environment and taught it to young people who then share what they learn with others back home;

2. Involved representatives of conflicting perspectives on food and agriculture policy in round table discussions of issues related to the farm bill;
3. Implemented conferences for state and community leaders on economic development, health care, education, waste management and other topics in a four-state region;
4. Developed and presented statewide programs via telecommunications on critical issues such as substance abuse, health care, waste management and education, selected by a democratically chosen council;
5. Used press releases, press conferences and background seminars for members of the press to get information about food and agriculture issues from a specialized journal into the rural and urban press;
6. Sponsored forums bringing together experts with diverse views in three issues areas—pesticides, agricultural policy and changing agricultural technologies—and developed educational programs for citizen leaders and the nationwide networks of two collaborating organizations;
7. Encouraged and facilitated collaboration among local communities in two multi-county regions for purposes of rural development;
8. Developed educational materials on the links between agricultural policy and international trade and development for dissemination through ten coalition members' home organizations;
9. Facilitated a process of grassroots citizen action on natural resource issues in a rural county;
10. Developed educational materials on food safety, food cost and nutrition for use in bringing together diverse representatives of local food systems to discuss common concerns; and
11. Developed educational materials designed to promote a broader, more people- and community-oriented understanding of ground-water policy issues, especially among state and local government officials, and initiated pilot projects in seven states.

Project Evaluation

Our evaluation of this cluster of projects is relying on a *case study approach*. This approach aims first to understand in some depth the *story* of each project and, second, via comparative analyses of these individual stories, to extract broader understandings of key elements of effective public policy education. Our work to date has focused primarily on the project's coalitions and implementation strategies.

For the most part, only limited data on outcomes or results have been available. During the coming year, we intend to pay more attention to outcomes and the experiences of participants in project activities. Consequently, the lessons reported in this paper—especially ones that refer to outcomes or effectiveness—need to be understood as tentative. What have we learned about principles and techniques of public policy education?

Lesson #1: Coalitions, despite having a diversity of meanings, are an effective strategy for public policy education. Coalitions for the eleven projects vary widely in size, scope, type of members and structure. Size varies from two single-organization projects using grassroots strategies to develop community-based coalitions, to three coalitions with nine to ten organizational members and one with eighteen individual members. There are single-state and multi-state coalitions and ones whose members are all (or nearly all) national organizations based in Washington, D.C. Six of the coalitions contain both extension and nonextension members, three contain only nonextension members and two contain only extension members.

In the majority of projects, at least some of the organizational and/or individual coalition members had prior experience working together. There is not much evidence that original coalition formation was based on any carefully thought-out rationale. Explicit rationales were cited primarily when new organizations were added to a coalition. Examples include the new organization's ability to provide needed resources, to lend prestige to the project, or to facilitate access to audiences. There is little evidence that representation of diverse perspectives on the issues was a rationale for coalition membership, and hardly anyone we interviewed indicated serious concern about the exclusion of any group or interest.

Two of the projects have what we call *developing* coalitions, a single organization working toward the formation of a coalition. Six have *asymmetrical* coalitions, with one or more dominant organizations (often extension) staffing the project and others in supporting roles. Three projects have *symmetrical* coalitions, with all members of the coalition collaborating more or less equally.

Beyond coalition structure, the working definition and significance of the coalition concept also varies across projects. In a few cases, the supporting members of a coalition play a role that is not greatly different from a simple advisory committee, prompting us to wonder what the minimal conditions for a coalition are. In many projects, the coalition appears to represent primarily the *enhancement and pooling of resources* across organizations. In others, the coalition has developed and adopted a *new agenda* for the project that reflects at least some interests of all coalition members. In one project, the development of an agenda was actually preceded by the "arduous

hammering out, word by word” of a *common statement of principles* that have served to guide and frame project direction, materials and activities.

Despite these differences in the meaning of “coalition,” cluster evaluation interviewees consistently cited important contributions to the quality of their public policy education projects attributable to the coalition. These include the ability to do a project that a single organization could not do alone, better educational materials as a result of interaction, access to more diverse audiences and increased credibility for the project due to multiple sponsorship. In one project, for example, extension and the League of Women Voters have collaborated, with the League providing extension with access to environmentalists and other “urban” audiences, while extension has helped give the League entree and credibility in the agricultural community. In nearly every project, it was acknowledged by persons we interviewed that the project could not have been done without the other members of the coalition or that, in any case, it would have been a very different project had one organization done it alone. More individualized benefits related to professional development in public policy education were also cited, such as learning to listen and work with diverse participants in public policy settings or developing new knowledge about or sensitivity to unfamiliar issues, perspectives or organizations.¹

Although we don’t find the diverse definitions of “coalition” troubling, we do find it surprisingly unclear what guidelines to recommend regarding questions such as how much authority a coalition should have or what the criteria for membership should be. Some departure from “business as usual” should pretty clearly be expected. Qualities that may enhance the likelihood of such departures include coalitions that are ongoing (not, for example, just ad hoc groups organized to plan a single event), a coalition governing body with decision-making authority, and membership representing more than one organization (not just several extension organizations, for example) or at least representing more than one set of interests or concerns within the organization (e.g., production agriculture and nutrition). Beyond that, a coalition should also enable a project to address a full range of perspectives on an issue and to tap the necessary diversity of information sources, but such criteria can apparently be met with a variety of coalition designs.

Lesson #2: Coalitions require attention to process or working relationships, not just to content or task. Most of the projects have been characterized by good working relationships among coalition members. Two of them feature stories of significant earlier conflicts among coalition members, involving, in one case, different substantive perspectives on agriculture/environment issues and, in the

¹Drawbacks to working in coalitions included increased time demands, the added complexity of project logistics and (less commonly) tensions resulting from pre-coalition rivalries among coalition members.

other, differing views of public policy education—action vs. a more reflective orientation (or the line between advocacy and education). Two other projects have had at least minor difficulties around turf issues or project goals. In all cases, the conflicts were satisfactorily resolved.

While attention to coalition building seems inarguably important, it is not a well-developed skill for some project staff. The factors that appear to contribute to strong, positive working relationships are well exemplified in one project with a coalition of ten organizations representing diverse viewpoints. Members 1) equally share project authority and responsibility, 2) are supported in their project activities by their home organizations, 3) had worked with each other before and brought some measure of trust to the coalition, and, perhaps most importantly, 4) have allocated time and energy to coalition-building activities.

In short, coalitions need to be nurtured. Too much attention to process can divert needed energies away from substance or task, but it isn't enough to bring two or more organizations together and expect that cooperation will flow easily. Careful attention to "up-front" work at the beginning of a collaborative effort can be particularly helpful.

Lesson #3: *Public policy education is possible on a wide variety of issues and with a wide variety of audiences.* Although the grants for this cluster of projects were ostensibly available for projects dealing with food and agriculture issues, a wide variety of issues have, in fact, been addressed, including the 1990 farm bill, commodity programs, international trade, environmental protection, waste management, groundwater, nutrition, food safety, food supply, health care, education, economic development, and substance abuse. In the majority of cases, the issues to be addressed were selected by project leaders; in others, they were chosen by panels of experts, local leaders, or citizens, or by some democratic or emergent process. There are notable differences in the degree to which coalitions or their dominant organizations have selected issues outside their normal or traditional areas of expertise. One project has put the selection of issues entirely in the hands of a council of appointed and elected individuals from throughout the state, whose choices are informed by opinion surveys and a statewide "agenda conference." This project, with extension as the dominant organization, has conducted successful statewide programs on issues as diverse as the farm bill, substance abuse, waste management and health care.

Target audiences for the projects are nearly as varied as the issues, ranging from relatively small groups of state-level policy leaders to the general U.S. public; from relatively homogenous groups, such as youth or the press, to quite heterogenous ones varying in substantive expertise and perspectives on the issues; and from indi-

viduals relatively close to the policy process, such as national, state or local policy makers, policy professionals, the press, and technical experts, to ones farther from the process, such as citizens, citizen groups, youth and educators. The projects also vary in the degree to which they have actively courted audiences with divergent or competing perspectives on the issues.

Evidence of the ability to address a wide variety of issues is something we find encouraging. The necessity that public policy education be timely and relevant with respect to the ongoing political process means educators, to be effective, must often accept other people's issues or definitions of the issues. Different organizations are variously well-positioned to address different issues—another possible reason for valuing the coalition approach. The ability to address a wide variety of audiences is important for similar reasons. The audiences that need the most help are likely to be different with different issues, and different audiences are likely to need different *kinds* of help. Clear delineation of, and familiarity with, target audiences are essential for effective public policy education. Moreover, multiple audiences—or at least the ability to reflect multiple viewpoints on an issue—are also highly desirable. Otherwise, we risk “preaching to the choir” and perpetuating the difficulty our political system has in moving from “solitude” to “sociability,” from self-interest to public decision.

Lesson #4: Increases in technical knowledge about issues and mutual learning about diverse perspectives among existing participants in the policy process are more common objectives than the empowerment of new participants. Three principal “modes” of public policy education detectable among the projects can be labeled *information provision*, *dialogue*, and *empowerment*. Information provision is clearly the most prevalent mode among the eleven projects and is the single dominant mode in at least six of them. Information provision is reflected in printed materials, conference presentations, press conferences, video documentaries, research conducted in response to requests from project participants, etc. It includes information about existing conditions and trends, causes of problems, the positions and strategies of different groups, alternative solutions and case studies of solutions that have worked in other settings. Although it can include information about the policy process as well as about the issues, information provision in practice most often focuses on the issues.

In addition to information provision, many of the projects also provide at least some opportunity for dialogue. No more than four of them have dialogue as the dominant mode, however. Although diverse perspectives on an issue can also be clarified through information provision, the dialogue mode shifts the emphasis from educator-as-provider-of-information to educator-as-creator-of-a-forum in which participants from different sides of an issue inform one an-

other. Examples from the present cluster of projects include round table discussions of issues related to the farm bill involving farmers, environmentalists and others; food forums involving diverse food and agriculture experts at the national level; and local discussion groups involving representatives of different components of the food system.

Empowerment is clearly the least prevalent mode, with no more than three projects placing any significant emphasis on it at all. Education in this mode may include information provision or dialogue, but is distinguished from the other modes primarily by its targeted audiences—namely, people who are affected by public issues but have, by and large, not previously participated. For example, one project in the present cluster is tempting to mobilize citizens in a county with a large Spanish-speaking population; another is targeted to youth; and a third has an explicit objective of reaching large numbers of citizens (rather than providing in-depth information to a smaller number). Projects in the empowerment mode are at least somewhat more likely 1) to allow issues to emerge from the intended audience, 2) to include information about the policy process as well as the issues, and 3) to provide at least some special encouragement or assistance in taking action.

In our view, working with groups already involved in the policy process is certainly a legitimate focus for public policy education, especially when the goal is to increase mutual understanding among the groups. That is difficult (and risky) work, and it facilitates something that is otherwise unlikely to happen in the normal course of political life. Yet, such work may only serve to maintain the status quo with respect to who participates and has a voice if it is not accompanied by equivalent efforts to facilitate the participation of individuals and groups who are affected by issues *but not yet involved*. Challenges to present patterns of unequal representation and participation in policy making deserve an equal place in public policy education.

Lesson #5: Attention to process as well as content is a critical feature of effective public policy education. Three projects in the cluster have *events-oriented* project designs that emphasize audience participation in a carefully-planned event such as a seminar, conference, training workshop or round table. Two projects have *materials-oriented* designs emphasizing the development and subsequent dissemination of educational materials to identified audiences. Three projects have two-phased, *materials-events* designs that involve an extensive process of materials development followed by use of the materials in a planned set of educational activities. Other designs include a *media-oriented* project, aiming to get policy-related material from a specialized journal into the more general news media, and two projects with *emergent, locally-based* designs—one working on the empowerment of ordinary citizens in a river basin

and the other an effort to get localities to work together on rural development issues.

All three events-oriented projects have faced the challenge of follow-up, or how to promote participants' engagement beyond the main project event. Both materials-oriented projects have experienced problems with dissemination and, hence, meaningful use of their materials. The three events-materials projects have generally given more serious attention from the outset to process as well as content preparation for their activities. They have, for example, developed substantive materials while also providing training in facilitation for project implementers. However, even in these projects, ample process assistance has not always been extended to project audiences, nor have these projects been completely free of materials-utilization difficulties. The remaining projects—the media-oriented and emergent, locally-based—have also faced process-related challenges.

There are, in short, two potentially important questions here. One is about the utilization of educational materials. One project, for example, found that coalition members who were helpful in developing materials have been less helpful in following through with plans to disseminate the materials through their home organizations. Another has struggled to overcome resistance to materials adoption by intended users of the materials, mainly other educators. A third has experienced delays in materials development to the point that implementation has had to begin before all materials are ready.

The second question concerns the sufficiency of process assistance for audiences. The coalition for one project has wondered if its conferences on issues should be followed up with the convening of small groups of key individuals for further exploration of policy options. Another project requires teams of participants to carry out follow-up activities, but has been criticized by at least one coalition member for providing only limited assistance in team-building or activity-planning. Other projects have been disappointed in the rate of movement toward such objectives as cooperation among local communities or local-level replication of the project's statewide educational events.

While links to project outcomes have yet to be established (a third-year task for the cluster evaluation), it appears reasonable to expect that a dual emphasis on process as well as content would enhance the quality and power of audiences' encounters with a project. Careful attention to process as well as content may also be necessary if the effort put into the development of educational materials is to have an adequate payoff in actual utilization. Looking across the eleven projects, it appears to us that many of them have devoted relatively little attention to process. There seems to be a tendency to provide information or opportunities for dialogue and assume that process will take care of itself. With some audiences, that is likely a

safe assumption, but, with others, it may not be. Perhaps the importance of process as well as content should be another consideration in coalition formation—making sure the capacity for both will be available at appropriate points in a project's evolution.

Lesson #6: *Tensions between education and advocacy are inevitable in public policy education and established guidelines for resolving them are not necessarily adequate.* Most project staff indicate that, although they may have personal opinions, they are endeavoring to uphold the traditional public policy education model of informed debate, representative discussion and consideration of all policy alternatives and their consequences. Nonetheless, most of the projects have reported struggling with finding and maintaining the fine line between education and advocacy. In projects with advocacy organizations as coalition members, the education-advocacy tension is often quite overt and recognized. Although some of one project's materials were criticized for being biased, all of these organizations have accepted and are endeavoring to adhere to, the traditional public policy education model, at least for the current project. It is generally recognized that participants in project activities—and in other contexts, coalition members themselves—may advocate as a result of what they learn, but that advocacy has no place in the project itself.

Education-advocacy tensions are often more subtle and less recognized in projects with exclusively or predominantly extension coalition members. Extension educators are generally familiar with the traditional public policy education model, so that education versus advocacy has been openly contested in only one of the extension-dominated projects. Yet, underlying a number of these projects have been important disagreements about what constitutes neutrality on the food and agriculture issues at hand. These conflicts have typically been initiated by spokespersons for production agriculture (objecting, for example, to alleged environmental, nutrition or sustainable agriculture biases), but have often resulted in nonextension members of these coalitions or other outside observers maintaining that extension is not as unbiased on these issues as it claims to be. One project struggled—with difficulty and success to hammer out curriculum materials acceptable to both environmental and agricultural interests, while materials for another project were repeatedly criticized by representatives of both traditional and more progressive viewpoints on food and agriculture issues. These conflicts can be quite emotional, sometimes striking at the heart of basic assumptions, for example, about the ability of science to solve problems and provide single best answers. In most cases, the projects and especially their coalitions have been viewed as steps in the right direction, helping to expand the range of issues, alternatives, constituencies and interests represented in extension's educational programs.

Note that these significant and meaningful conflicts are *not* battles over education versus advocacy. The issue is not whether a range of alternatives or viewpoints is being presented (it is, in each case) or whether a particular outcome is being advocated (it isn't). Instead, the question is *what* range of alternatives or viewpoints is being presented and which ones are left out. Similar questions can be raised about the projects of coalitions with advocacy organizations as key members. Project materials, though developed and presented in a neutral nonadvocacy fashion, may selectively feature content that would lead most reasonable individuals to agree with a coalition's position on the issues. The continuum in question here, it seems to us, is not *education versus advocacy* so much as *balance versus bias*.

Another source of simmering dissatisfaction with the traditional public policy education model is the concern that, at least for some audiences, something more than the "neutral" presentation of information is needed before they can translate what they learn into action. This is less of a concern, though by no means absent, in projects with audiences that are relatively familiar with the policy process, such as policy makers, policy professionals or the press. Although some projects have asked discussion participants to come up with policy recommendations, and others—for example, the one with youth as the audience—have encouraged or required participants to "do something" as a result of their learning, none of the projects has placed much emphasis on the provision of specific assistance to help people get involved in policy making. Is it possible that fear of advocacy sometimes deters public policy educators from being as helpful to their audiences as possible?

It seems to us that some rethinking of the education-advocacy tension is in order. Emphasis on the neutral presentation of alternatives and consequences and the corresponding ban on advocacy continue to be workable guidelines for some projects, but others increasingly find them inadequate. They offer too little "so what?" for some audiences and, in other cases, fail to provide any help when there are disagreements about what's neutral. Is it possible that public policy educators need a different set of standards? Is *balance versus bias* the more important continuum? Do educators worry too much about what they should *not* be doing—i.e., advocating—and too little about what they should be doing? Would *balance* or *fairness* be more useful standards, implying the importance of identifying a full range of perspectives on an issue and remaining open to new definitions of balance as additional perspectives come to light?

These are just some thoughts. We are hardly prepared at this point to say what a new set of guidelines should be, or even that the old ones should be thrown out. It seems to us that the choice of guidelines should be informed by consideration of the likely consequences of following different guidelines, where the kinds of consequences we have in mind include losing credibility among groups

who oppose the positions an educator is perceived to be advocating or failing to have any impact on an audience because they're bored or confused by the educator's neutrality. Reassessing the education-advocacy tension is a big task—well beyond the scope of this paper and, indeed, beyond the scope of the present cluster of projects. It is a topic, however, that we believe needs to be considered seriously by all public policy educators.

Lesson #7: Reported outcomes emphasize individual learning from project activities. Evidence of more substantial changes in behavior by individuals or groups and actual impacts on public policy may require different evaluation strategies or more sustained educational efforts. According to our preliminary analysis of project outcomes, evidence of impacts on individual participants is reported far more often than impacts on issues or the policy process.² Findings from surveys by project evaluators emphasize individual participants' reports of acquiring new information, having their ideas changed, learning about other people's points of view, planning to return home and share what they've learned, and receiving information they can immediately apply to problems in their communities. Anecdotal evidence also tends to come from individual participants. Moreover, even when issue or process outcomes are reported, individual-level self-report data are generally relied upon. For example, *increased recognition of linkages among related issues* is reflected in reports that individual participants have increased their recognition of linkages rather than descriptions, for example, of more general changes in the way an issue is defined by policy makers, activists or the news media.

Some of the best of the relatively limited evidence on process or issue outcomes comes from observations by project staff who are knowledgeable about the public policy process and sufficiently aware of the activities of policy makers and political activists to be able to detect likely project impacts. Examples include the reported insistence by participants in a project event that they receive written summaries of small-group discussions as quickly as possible so they could be used in preparing for an upcoming legislative session, or the report at another event of a "feeling that there were light bulbs turning on over people's heads" and a panel member's observation that "for the first time he thought people (in the state) had come to a consensus that there was a problem."

If the relative scarcity of process or issue impacts is not simply an artifact of the choice of evaluation strategies, it may relate to the limited intensity of most of the projects' educational interventions and the relative absence of specific process assistance or encourage-

²We sent project leaders a list of objectives taken from discussions at Kellogg-sponsored networking conferences and from our own first-year data analysis and asked the leaders to provide evidence of outcomes related to any objectives that were important in their projects. The findings reported here are based on preliminary analysis of data from eight of the eleven projects.

ment. While all project design types potentially offer participants the opportunity for sustained (versus one-shot) involvement, such involvement is a critical feature of only the more emergent, locally-based projects, where continued participation by (many of) the same individuals is necessary for project success. Among the other projects, most participants have only a single exposure to project activities. For many audiences, a one-day workshop, though informative and exciting, may not be enough to catalyze more active participation in the policy process.

Conclusions

For an overall conclusion to this paper, it seems appropriate to return to the coalition requirement. Are coalitions “the way to go” in public policy education and, if so, what form should they take? Our own feeling is that coalitions have certainly been an effective and productive strategy for the present cluster of projects. We don’t see any reason *not* to do a project with a coalition. But would we say, “Never again do a public policy education project without a coalition”? We’re not sure. What is clear is that public policy educators need to be able to address a wide variety of issues and audiences, to treat the relevant issues in a balanced and credible way, and to create conditions for dialogue that is genuinely open to participants on all sides of an issue. We would guess that such things, though not impossible, are extremely difficult to do within a single organization. The land-grant university, being a large and complex organization, may have some potential along these lines. As more than one interviewee pointed out, some of the most important coalition building in the current projects has taken place *within* the land-grant university. But, even here, it has generally been acknowledged that such “internal” coalition building is easier to do when “outsiders” are also involved in the same coalition.³

As a final note, we would also like to say something about the limited attention to empowerment. The principal focus in the present cluster of projects has been, not on *those affected but not involved*, but on *those who are already involved but not talking to one another*. What has been worked on so admirably is immensely important, in our opinion, and much of great value is being learned. But, if Kellogg were looking for our advice, we would say, “Fund another round of projects, but, this time, attach strings that stimulate equivalent learning about empowerment.” It would be interesting to

³Moreover, projects with coalitions in which extension has been the dominant partner have tended to be precisely the ones that have made additional use of the coalition concept beyond the project’s “official” coalition—including ad hoc coalition-like groups to plan specific project events, advisory committees or similar groups to tap the resources of additional organizations beyond the “official” coalition, and the use of coalitions in implementation strategies, such as involving diverse audiences in coalition-like study groups or requiring that pilot sites have coalitions paralleling the overall project coalition. This may suggest that, although there does not always need to be a formal coalition of multiple organizations, there are various ways of introducing the coalition “effect” into a project, and at least one of them is always necessary.

see what new twist such a cluster of projects would add to the question of whether coalitions are “the way to go” and, if so, what form they should take.

REFERENCES

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