



Introduction to Public Policy Education

Jerri Cockrel, Extension Public Policy Specialist

You can teach about controversial public issues without becoming controversial through public policy education. 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.”¹ Public policy issues usually arise out of disagreement over what the role of government should be.² While the experts differ on wording and emphasis, most agree that public decisionmaking differs substantially from private decisionmaking and requires different educational methods.

Public policy education begins with the issue and tries to educate those who will be affected by public policy. The objective is not usually reflective of any one individual or group. If an issue exists or is emerging, controversy over the objectives, alternatives, and interpretation of the consequences is to be expected. So the identification of affected parties and conscious efforts to involve them in the policymaking process are built into the educational program.

The public policy educator designs the program and facilitates the educational process. In public policy education, it is not clear where the

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learners want to go. Some of them do not know how to get there. They may not want to ride together. Some of them know how to drive better than others. We give them maps and driving lessons. Sometimes we help them figure out where they have been. We do not ride along, but they often will call in for consultation.

Public Policy Education and Future Extension Programming

Public policy education is essential to future Extension programming. People today are more aware of what is happening outside their local area. They are more sensitive to the effects of agricultural chemicals on health; more aware of the impacts that

international markets have on local commodity prices; more knowledgeable of the link between events in the nation’s capital and their local community. In short, public attitudes and relationships are changing, so Extension is changing. All of us — Extension agents, leaders, and specialists — are affected. We do not have to look for public problems and issues; they find us.

Extension agents and leaders can play a special role in public decisionmaking. Many of us already have been involved in public policy decisionmaking, sometimes as educators and sometimes as advocates.

Many of the Extension educators in Family Community Leadership are Extension home economists. So, to a degree, our respective activities have fashioned our labels. Perhaps it is our work more than our disciplinary background that defines us.

Each of the three types of Extension education — community development, leadership development, and public policy education — complements the others. The lessons that people learn in leadership development tend to make them receptive to research-based information and nurture the expectation that one can work with people to effect solutions. The contemporary approaches to social action have borrowed a leaf from the public policy educator’s book and anticipated opposition or other points of view. People who have participated in leadership development or community development programs appear to be much more receptive to programs on public issues. These complementarities suggest that cooperation will make all of us more effective. Also, issues we face today are more complex than in the past, demanding multidisciplinary responses with more interaction among subject-matter specialists.

How Can Public Policy Education

Be Useful? Learning the methods of public policy education can help you prevent programs from being blocked by controversy and enable you to carry out programs that you might otherwise have had to avoid. Using public policy education methods will help you deal with issues that divide citizens into factions. These methods help people understand issues in the public arena.

Defining Public Policy Education

Public policy education in Extension is a subdiscipline; it is not a program area, but is applicable to all program areas. It can be (but does not have to be) a separate program effort, or line item, or plan of work. If public policy education is not a program area or effort, then what is it?

Public policy education is a methodology — a combination of philosophy and methods. The philosophy is based on the ideals of self-government; the methods are those that educators have found helpful when dealing with controversy. Together, the philosophy and methods provide the educational tools that Extension educators can use when dealing with public issues.

Policy is an agreed-upon course of action, guiding principle, or procedure considered to be expedient, prudent, or advantageous; for example, “Payday is the last day of the month.” Many public policy educators use the following definition of public policy: a settled course of action adopted and followed by the public. Public policies are defined by many groups, such as councils, legislatures, and courts, and they take many forms. Laws are initiated by the legislative branch, promulgated and carried out by the administrative branch, and interpreted by the judicial branch. All of these actions create public policy.

Education is sometimes defined as information dissemination and technology transfer. But there is more to education than this. Education also

builds the capacity to solve problems, to reason, and to understand people. Education is commonly aimed at individuals, but our intent may just as well be to improve the capacity and understanding of organizations.

Private Decisions Versus Public Decisions

Decisions are made every day. They range from the minor, such as deciding which brand of soft drink to buy, to the significant, such as proposing marriage or starting a business. Most decisions are private. They are made by individuals and firms with little thought to how they will affect those not immediately involved. Our economy and indeed our culture assume that individuals and firms are the best judges of what is in their own interest.

Contrast this to what you see and hear in the news. The news media seldom report private decisions. Private decisions are news only if the decision (1) is peculiar, abnormal, or about some famous person; (2) runs counter to law or custom; (3) affects significant numbers of individuals; or (4) has an impact on the “public welfare.”

Private decisions are not normally controversial. They are usually treated as “none of the public’s business.” Why is the news mostly about controversy? The obvious answer is that sensation “sells.” The less obvious fact is that controversy implies the existence of a problem that cannot be solved privately; it requires public intervention.

There is another big component to the news: the actions of government are followed continuously. What the president of the United States does every day is news; what the president of a major corporation does is seldom news — only when it affects the general economy. While most decisions made daily are private, it is public decisions that occupy most of the news and much of our attention.

Some individuals perceive the major difference between private and public

decisions to be that, when we make private decisions, we are trying to do something for ourselves. This line of reasoning goes on to argue that we get involved in public decisions only to protect ourselves. These observations about motives for involvement in government may seem cynical. It is true that there are people who act on noble motivations to see that government is fair, efficient, humane, consistent, and so forth. But involvement is more commonly propelled by some sense of self-interest and personal gain.

Motives and behavior aside, public decisions are very important to us. They affect the way we make our living and the quality of life itself. Public decisions determine the quality of education, control traffic, provide defense, stabilize banking, and supply our judicial and legislative systems. None of these services would be provided without public decisions to determine what the policy should be. It is the decisionmaking process that distinguishes public from private decisions.

There is a need for education for public decisions, although the educator’s role is not readily apparent to many Extension agents, leaders, and specialists. Thomas Jefferson stated this need for education eloquently:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

Jefferson’s statement upholds the role of the individual as the best judge of his or her best interests, while recognizing the legitimate role for education to enable the individual to become a better decisionmaker. His reference in the first line to “the ultimate powers of the society” clearly includes the making of public decisions as well as private ones.

What Public Policy Educators Need To Know

Public policy educators need:

- to distinguish between decisions that are public and those that are private;
- to know how public policy is made. That is, they need to understand politics and to recognize how politics works. They do not have to like politics, but they do have to understand the process;
- to know when they are likely to be perceived as acting politically;
- to know when they can practice politics and when such practice will compromise their ability to educate;
- to be familiar with a variety of policymaking models and competent in at least one of them. (Competence means the ability to use a model in analyzing an issue.);
- to be able to distinguish myths, and value judgements, and to help others do the same;
- to recognize the influences of values and ethics on public policy;
- to apply at least one public policy education method;
- to be able to design effective public policy education programs.

Teachable Moments

Public policy educators must be aware when a “teachable moment” is at hand. There are times when education is impossible; one must wait. Sometimes there simply is nothing to offer; we either have no information, or the experts do not agree, or there is no

one we can rely on. Other times we have good information, but no one is interested. At the other extreme, when interests have reached the pitch of unreasoning conviction, one cannot educate. Teachable moments lie in those periods between apathy and war, i.e., “The Issue-Intervention Cycle.” An issue may be “unteachable” for years; then, within a matter of months, a teachable moment may emerge.

Help with Public Policy Education

There are people in every state who have expertise in public policy education. They can be useful counselors, teammates, or advisors in both your study and your future practice. (Keep in mind that you are looking for educational help, not seeking to form a coalition to participate in politics. The distinction is essential!) These people include agents, specialists, and administrators who have been trained in public policy at the Western Extension Winter School in Tucson, Arizona; the Duluth Extension Summer School in Minnesota; the Southern Regional Extension Summer School at North Carolina State University, Raleigh; Public Policy Specialists Seminars in Washington, D.C.; the Otter Rock (Western States) and the PACE (Michigan) projects; or the Extension Home Economics Public Policy seminars in Washington, D.C.

Summing Up

Now that you know the basic concepts of public policy and how education can improve the public dialogue about it, we will start to build your understanding of the context. The context for public policy education is the political system. To most of us, public policy is made in the mystical world of Washington, D.C., and the role that an Extension agent or specialist might play in policy formulation is obscure, if not inappropriate. It is essential that we understand how public policy is made in America, not only in Washington, but in our state capitals, county courthouses, and city halls.

The other three publications in this series discuss how public policy is made; how educators can learn to distinguish between facts, myths, and values, and how public policy educators can maintain their objectivity. These publications are:

- IP-19 Public Policymaking in America*
- IP-20 Public Policy: Facts, Myths, and Values*
- IP-21 Directions for Public Policy Programming*

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¹*B.L. Flinchbaugh, Kansas State University*

²*Richard Barrows, Iowa State University*

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