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Principles of Public Policy Education

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Principles of Public Policy Education*

by

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Abstract: Five short articles that analyze the nature of public issues and the methods for conducting informal adult public policy education.

*Designed for teaching, extension, and adult continuing education staff who have not yet had experience in conducting educational programs on sometimes controversial public issues.

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Principles of Public Policy Education

Section I

ARE PUBLIC PROBLEMS DIFFERENT FROM PRIVATE ONES?*

by Dr. Mark Edelman**

I bought a house in Brookings, S.D. and I have several trees and bushes in my yard. Last summer I noticed a bug on one of my bushes. What did I do? I called the bug specialist from SDSU. He came out and took a look at my insects and prescribed a pesticide that would kill the bug but not my bush. I bought the prescribed pesticide from Waltz Hardware and sprayed it on. No more bugs.

Also, last summer after I moved in, a local group of residents from my neighborhood visited with me about building a sidewalk 5 blocks long on my side of the street. Many in the party were my age with elementary school children and were interested in building the sidewalk so that their children wouldn't have to walk in the street on their way to school. They were starting to get the support of all the property owners on our street. However, several of the property owners were retired and their kids had already graduated, so they were against the petition because they believed that they would receive little benefit or they simply didn't want a sidewalk cluttering up their yard. So we called the policy specialist from SDSU to solve our problem. But he was little help in making the decision. All he could do was tell us how many kids we had, how many of them might get hit in the street over a ten year period, and how much it would cost each property owner to build the sidewalk. So how did we solve the problem? We voted.

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*From J.B. "Heavy" Kohlmeyer and B.L. Flinchbaugh in interviews on informal adult public affairs education.

**Agricultural and Public Policy Economist, South Dakota State University, Jan. 1983

What is the key difference in these two real world problems? The key is the number of objectives. In the first one there is no disagreement over my objectives or values. The bug man knew that my objective was to get rid of the bugs without killing my bushes. In the second problem there was a disagreement over objectives.

There were two reasons for this disagreement. People, who maybe had the same values, disagreed because they had unlike circumstances. For example, the older people without kids would have to pay for sidewalks on their property, however, the sidewalks were to be used primarily by their neighbor's kids. So we had a divergence of objectives due to differing circumstances.

Secondly, many people said that they thought sidewalks were less beautiful then green grass. Can you argue with them? So we had a divergence of objectives due to unlike values. The only way to solve the public problem was to vote.

Specialists using scientific methods can solve problems if there is one objective and if that objective is clearly known. However, if multiple objectives exist as they do in all public problems and some private ones, then the specialist's scientific methods can only facilitate the decision making process by creating an atmosphere for a more informed decision.

In deciding the multiple objective private problem, the individual considers his or her options and makes a decision. For example, the household manager must decide what to consume and whether to consume or save and the producer must decide what to produce and whether to reinvest or distribute income from production. However, in deciding the public problem, we must either establish that a selected individual or group authority will make the decision or we must follow a voting rule. Voting is simply a method of revealing and arbitrating group preferences for decision- making.

There is a group of social planners who advocate using assumed theoretical models to maximize estimated benefits minus costs for society "as a planning tool for decision-making." Informed decision-makers are usually suspicious of such concepts because there is no such thing as scientifically proven optimal solution to a controversial public problem.

First, in order to arrive at a scientific solution, the various objectives must be weighted. Therefore, the social planners must include weights based on their own values and circumstances or they will poll a sample from the public. So they either assume that they know more than the public or that the public knows more than their elected decision-makers. Informed decision-makers recognize that the weights can be juggled to support or oppose any issue. So, you just juggle the weights to get the results you want.

A second compounding factor for the social planners, is the nature of "public goods". A public good is defined as something that provides a benefit for which no individual has the ability or right of exclusion. For example, the people in my neighborhood who opposed building the sidewalk, have the right to exclude you from using their house. Their house and its use is a private good. But they don't have the right of excluding you from using the sidewalk in front of their house. So, use of a sidewalk is a public good. These same people do not have the ability to exclude you from receiving pleasure (or displeasure) in seeing their front yard. Economists include this pleasure or displeasure concept in their definition of a public good.

Now as I mentioned earlier, the public policy Economist can measure the cost of the sidewalk, the number of kids in the neighborhood and the probability that one of the kids would get hit by walking in the street if the sidewalk wasn't there. But the economist has trouble putting a value on your benefit (or cost) from seeing my front yard. Nor can he place a value on the pleasure received by the property owner who prefers green grass to sidewalk. The

social planner goes ahead and makes assumptions about these values. So, the social planner's optimal solution, which is based on estimated values of benefits and costs, is always suspect. In addition to the credibility of the weights he places on the diverse objectives for society, there is no way to measure values for some kinds of public goods or bads. These public goods can only be listed as a consequence, without a value attached.

In the final analysis, it is the political arena--not scientific methods--that account for the values of these public goods through the voting process. And, if individuals do not agree with the final vote, they have several options: do nothing and live with the decision, attempt to change the public's opinion, vote out the current decision-makers, or move away to greener acres.

Principles of Public Policy Education

Section II

How Public Decisions are Made: Facts, Myths, and Value Judgements*

by Dr. Mark Edelman**

People apply their own value system to (1) facts, (2) myths, (3) predictions, (4) propaganda, and (5) recommendations in making public decisions. When a public problem emerges, there are various facts, myths, and values which circulate throughout public debate and discussion. Influential decision-makers recognize the differences.

Facts are simply what the word implies--a belief that can be verified as a true statement about an existing relationship. On the other hand, myths are beliefs that can be verified as not true. So, facts are true beliefs about what is, and myths are false beliefs about what exists.

Predictions are beliefs about future relationships--about what will be. Predictions usually are based on current facts and some assumptions about rates of change. However, perdictions can also be based on myths or biased assumptions.

Everyone possesses a value system--perceptions of what is right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral, ethical or unethical. Value judgements are simply beliefs about what ought to be or what should be. Propaganda and recommendations are another guy's beliefs about what should be. Propaganda and recommendations usually include a combination of facts, predictions and value judgements designed to influence your decision. The difference between propaganda and recommendations is that propaganda includes at least one myth. So, we take the facts, myths, predictions, propa-

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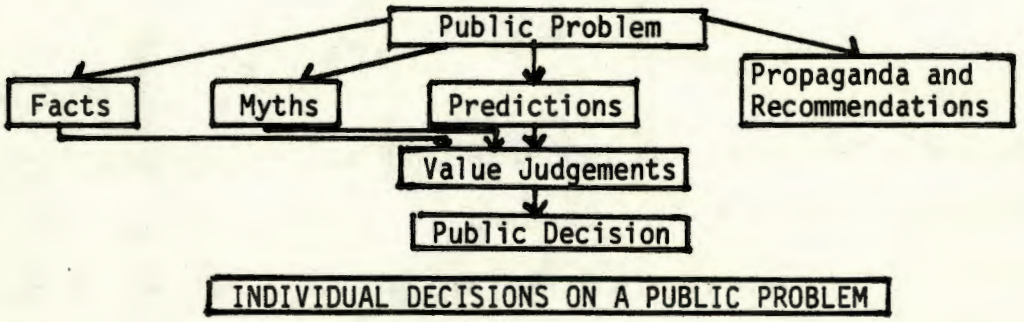
ganda and recommendations and apply our individual value system to determine our position on solutions to public problems.



INDIVIDUAL DECISIONS ON A PUBLIC PROBLEM

If decision-makers wish to make informed decisions then it is important for them to be able to distinguish what type of information is being presented or communicated. Not everyone is willing or able to spend the time required to separate facts from myths and in public meetings it is difficult to verify whether a statement is fact or myth in the middle of a heated discussion.

One way to support the facts is to quote a source which everyone regards as being reliable. Hopefully, the source is, in fact, reliable. Another way is to bring in a disinterested party that everyone regards as an authority. This approach is not fool proof either, but the quickest way for an expert to become a non-expert is to spread a myth or espouse his values on controversial issue. Still another approach is to conduct your own test, assuming everyone accepts the testing criteria and the resources are available to conduct the test. In many pool hall debates, most of the foremen-tioned methods of supporting facts are simply not feasible. So, in many cases people may simply rely on someone's reputation, community status, or powers of persuasion.

Predictions are often made by experts, but the probability of a point prediction actually coming true is infinitely small. It is important for

the decision-maker to understand not only the implications of the prediction but also the factors or uncertainties that are likely to alter the prediction scenario and the probable magnitude of their impact. The Minnesota Budget Director is now one of the unemployment statistics because he failed to acknowledge the randomness and uncertainty associated with predicting tax revenues in his prediction. This, in turn, created economic and political consequences when a short fall in tax revenue occurred.

Predictors are not always on the public payroll or in an objective consulting firm. Many experts are hired by special interests to present the interest's position in the best possible light. Likewise, some university and consulting firm experts may bias their predictions in order to make a favorite alternative solution look good. So when using experts, wise decision-makers ask enough questions to determine what biases the expert may have, what assumptions are used in his predictions, and what factors would cause his predictions to change.

In most cases, it is difficult to distinguish between recommendations and propaganda for the same reasons that facts and myths are difficult to distinquish. However, in using propaganda or recommendations, the presentor is attempting to influence the decision. Thus, it is important to distinquish between those who are and who are not attempting to influence your decisions. Generally, the role of the educator on public issues is to present the facts and predictions so that decision-makers will make a more informed vote. If values are included in the form of propaganda or recommendations then the role changes from educator to advocate. As an advocate your presentation is agreeable to some and disagreeable to others. Your testimony is regarded to be similar to that of a special interest group rather than a disinterested unbiased educator.

Principles of Public Policy Education

Section III

Experts and Public Decisions*

by Dr. Mark Edelman**

In whose jurisdiction does public finance and taxation belong? The political scientist's? The economist's? The moralist's? The military? Practically all disciplines are concerned with public finance in one form or another.

The military general says survival is a pre-condition for all else. The economist points out that public finance and taxation are essentially economic in nature and therefore, under his domain. The politician recognizes that the problem may be economic in nature, but no proposed solution can be effective unless it is politically acceptable. Those concerned with morals and ethics contend that concepts of right and wrong are more important than either economic or political considerations.

Paarlberg's diagram of the interrelationships among disciplines in determing public policy is the three ring trademark from an old Ballantine Beer bottle. One ring represents Politics, another represents Economics, and another represents Ethics:

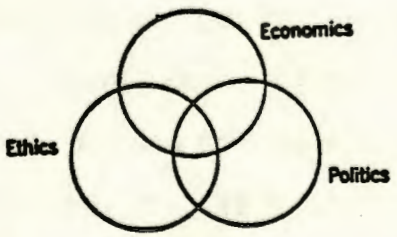


Figure 1. Policy Determination Involves Weighing Various Disciplines.

The economist's evaluation criterion is the "checkbook", thus, he/she asks: "What will the proposal cost?" The politician's criterion is votes, thus, he/she

*Most of the ideas presented here are found in Don Paarlberg's book: American Farm Policy, Chp. 14, "Politics, Ethics, and Economics."

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asks "Is it popular?" The people concerned with ethics use their conscience and prayer to ask: "Is it right, good, and fair?"

The diagram shows a small area included in all three circles. In terms of abstract thinking, such a proposal would be politically, economically and morally acceptable. Many elected cfficials have said that arguing against such issues is like arguing against God, motherhood, and apple pie. So such issues have smooth sailing through the political process.

For example, public funding for elementary education trains youngsters to read and write which improves the productive capacity of our society. Therefore, the economist is satisfied. It would generally be unpopular to eliminate schooling for kids, so providing elementary education is politically popular. To deny poor children the opportunity for schooling in the 3R's is generally regarded as morally and ethically unjust. Hence, there are few disputes on whether we ought to have public elementary schools.

Some proposals might be outside all of the rings in the diagram and may not satisfy any of the relevant disciplines. These proposals are unlikely to receive the attention of the decision-makers. However, if one happens to slip through then it is quickly repealed and certainly not repeated. Paarlberg's example is the actual slaughter and destruction of six million baby pigs during the Great Depression. This was offensive ethically. Economically we were destroying production potential. Politically, it was at best difficult to explain. Such a policy is not likely to be repeated.

Back to the diagram. The area within each circle may be enlarged or retracted over the life of an issue. Sometimes decision-makers may be against proposals philosophically until they more fully understand the political, economic or ethical consequences. Other times, decision-makers may favor a proposal under a mistaken notion or myth. In both cases, an objective expert can broaden the understanding of decision-makers and facilitate a more informed vote.

Politics is the art of compromise among special interests. Clout and influence of special interests are a political fact of life. Proponents of proposals attempt to enlarge the circles by developing coalitions and opponents attempt to reduce the circles by factionalizing and manipulating the proponents. Over the life of an issue various disciplines and special interest groups are communicating with the decision-makers. Ultimately, of course, all relevant disciplines and special interests are taken into account. Policy decision-makers are required to weigh these disciplines and interests to come to a decision.

Public policy decision-makers are usually generalists who are well rounded and enlightened citizens. Generally, decision-makers communicate with the relevant disciplines because the experts have some highly technical expertise that may facilitate the decision-maker by informing him of an option not yet considered, by correcting myth, or by correctly estimating probable consequences of an option. It is important to note that there is no way for the discipline specialist to be completely aware of the constraints imposed by other relevant disciplines and interest groups or by the beliefs and values of the politician's constituents and colleagues. Therefore, wise policy decision-makers and discipline experts know that in principle "the expert is <u>in tap</u>, <u>not on top</u>."

Experts only remain in tap if they provide accurate, objective advice. Thus it is advisable for the expert to know the limitations of his discipline. Economics and political science are inexact sciences and many economists and pollsters have gone by the way side due to inaccurate predictions that resulted from naive assumptions made in an abstract static model or because the bias and value judgments of the expert rendered an unprofessional appraisal of a proposal. So, for the expert to remain in tap he must be right, unbiased and objective.

Principles of Public Policy Education

Section IV

WHO MAKES PUBLIC DECISIONS AND WHO ARE THE POLICY EDUCATOR'S CLIENTELE*

by Dr. Mark Edelman**

The Community Pecking Order

Social power exists and is exercised in every community regardless of size and scope. The actors in a community relate to each other to from a "pecking order" or power structure. The organization of a community power structure can be described in a triangular fashion with the pecking order from top to bottom. Included in the community influence triangle are the kingmakers, kings, actives, interested citizens, and apathetic citizens.

COMMUNITY INFLUENCE TRIANGLE

Kingmakers are typically persons older than 50 who are in higher income groups of the community, who have above average education for their age group, and who are usually self-employed and long-time residents of the community. Their distinctive characteristic is that they command both intellectual and financial resources. They are few in number, but are extremely influential, and usually operate behind the scenes. In every community most public decisions are cleared with the kingmakers.

*Compiled from Ron Powers, "Identifying the Community Power Structure", NCR Extension Publ. 19, Nov. 1965; and B.L. Flinchbaugh, "Public Affairs Education", Kansas C.E.S. GT-48, April 1971.

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Kings are clearly visible to the public and frequently hold public office. They are often described as the local leadership but actually they report to and work with the kingmakers.

The Actives are generally civic-minded and participate in such things as United Fund drives and various causes. They frequently belong to many organizations, may sometimes write letters to the editor, and are vocal on public issues. There are usually many actives in relation to the number of kings and kingmakers.

The Interested Citizens usually read the public affairs section of the local newspaper, watch the news on T.V. in the evening, and vote in most elections. However, they are not very vocal or active in attempting to change public opinion unless they are personally affected.

The Apathetic Citizens are the bottom of the hierachy and simply don't care about public affairs except under unusual circumstances. The only way to get their attention is to condemn their house. By and large, most of the public are just interested or apathetic citizens.

The complexity of identifying the actors in the power structure tends to increase with the size of community. In small rural communities, the kingmaker influence maybe vested in one person or family. In larger urban communities, the kingmakers may be organized into factions or pools which may vary depending upon the scope and nature of the public problem and the relevant spheres of influence controlled by individual kingmakers.

Kingmakers are not born kingmakers but move up the community influence triangle. Kingmakers are former kings who are former actives who were once willing to do "leg work" for a variety of community projects. They were financially successful in their own rite and did not inherit all of their current wealth. They were trustworthy and dependable in dealing with others

and always checked out project ideas with the higher power actors. Eventually, they joined or were invited to join the right groups and were tested as kings by serving as officers of civic minded organizations or by serving in elected positions of authority in the community.

Kingmakers do not always remain kingmakers. To remain in control, kingmakers must be tuned in to the attitudes of the community, and be well informed daily. As attitudes of the community change, so do the kingmaker's attitudes or else they become former kingmakers. Kingmakers remain in control by being on the winning side of public issues. When they loose one battle, the kings take the heat. When they loose several, then actives and kings may no longer regard the kingmakers' advice as being credible. Former kingmakers may still control financial resources, but their impact on public decisions has been reduced.

Sometimes the kingmakers and kings are the same individuals. For example, a long-time President of a University, or a long-time President and Chairman of a local bank, or a majority shareholder of a major local manufacturing company who might also be on the city commission. However, sociological research indicates that top power actors do not usually hold positions of authority in the community, but that their power is more likely based on their influence i.e. control of intellectual and financial resources.

The Policy Educator's Clientele

Clearly the decision-makers must be reached if an educational program is to influence public policy. The key in identifying the clientele is to analyze the nature of each public problem, the decision-making process involved and the level of understanding of the influential power actors.

Mass media techniques--print and audio--can be useful in disseminating information to large numbers of people when the public problem is decided

by popular referendum or greatly influenced by public opinion. However, air time, column space, and editorial appeal requirements often preclude establishing a decision-making framework to thoroughly discuss a public problem, the alternative solutions, and the probable consequences of the options. So if the policy educator wishes to disseminate factual information without in depth analytical analysis, then he can utilize the mass media in order to reach the largest number of citizens in the community.

However, the policy educator is unlikely to greatly impact on public policy decisions if he does not disseminate in depth analytical analysis or if he does not receive feedback from the power elite. Mass media educational techniques fail in this respect because they are limited to one way communication. Without two-way communication with the influential power actors, there is no way for the educator to know what the misconceptions are, what options have been considered, and what values are relevant to the opinion formers. Thus, the successful public policy educator must use face-to-face communication with the influentials who in turn command respect and influence so as to "educate" others in the community and bring about a solution to the public problem.

Kingmakers are extremely busy people. Usually they do not read lengthy scholarly publications or listen to educational TV and radio programs. In many cases they will not attend public meetings, so the educator's initial communication with a kingmaker may likely be screened and indirectly communicated through kings and actives who impart their message to the kingmakers soon after the policy meeting.

In conclusion, for an educational program to successfully impact on public policy decision-making, the program must include eyeball-to-eyeball communication between the educator and the kingmakers, kings and active

citizens. The interested citizens will likely form their opinions by visiting with neighbors who happened to attend the public policy meeting or by reading accounts of the meeting in local papers. In regards to the apathetic citizens, there is no need to "scratch'em where they aren't itching".

Principles of Public Policy Education

Section V

Purposes and Methods of Public Policy Education*

Dr. Mark Edelman**

Purposes

In 1949, M. L. Wilson, then Director of the Federal Extension Service and active in agricultural policy, with the cooperation of Frank Peck of the Farm Foundation based in Chicago called a conference in Washington, D.C. on the subject "Educational Work on Public Policy Problems and Their Relationship to Agriculture". They invited to that conference some of the top agricultural policy educators in the country including 18 Land Grant economists, sixteen from the Federal Extension staff, four representatives from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and six consultants. The conferees included J. Carroll Bottum, Purdue University, John D. Black of Harvard, Charles M. Harden of the University of Chicago, O. B. Jesness of the University of Minnesota, and O. C. Stine of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA.

At that time, this group set forth the purpose of public policy educational work, which I belive reflects the implied contract between the public policy educator and his clientele that has stood the test of time.

The objectives were to develop in individuals:

1 - An active interest in public policy problems.

2 - An understanding of the facts and the principles involved.

3 - The ability to make judgements on public policy issues on the basis of a critical examination of the evidence and logical thinking, and

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*Purposes from J. Carroll Bottum in Increasing Understanding of Public Issues, 1980. Methods from J. B. "Heavy" Kohlmeyer and B. L. Flinchbaugh in interviews on informal adult public affairs education.

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4 - A desire and the ability to participate effectively in the solution of these problems.

Note that the entire emphasis of these objectives is to improve the capabilities of the individual in this area of knowledge. It follows the lines of the Chinese Proverb: If you feed a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. If you teach a man how to fish, he'll eat for a lifetime. Likewise the implied purpose of public policy education is not to increase dependence but to foster independent thinking and more informed decision making. This principle is consistent with the value judgement that solving public problems by the collective intelligence and authority of society is more acceptable than by the intelligence of any one individual member of society.

Methods

What teaching method will best accomplish the objectives stated for public policy education? In the beginning, six approaches to policy work were considered and are still employed with varying consequences. The alternative methods for handling controversial public issues are embodied in the following characterizations:

1. The Do Nothing Professor
2. The Informative Statistician
3. The Pontifical Prescriber
4. The Scientific Optimizer
5. The Analytical Advocate
6. The Alternatives and Consequences Educator

Public Policy issues are political in nature. Some issues such as single member districts and abortion raise more political or ethical questions than

economic ones. The level of emotion also varies over the life of a public issue. For example, it is difficult to educate in the middle of a heated political campaign. On the other hand, the public policy educator may be accused of stirring up trouble, if he selects an issue for which there is little public support for an educational meeting. The subject must be controversial enough to generate interest and support for an educational program, but not so controversial that rational discussion is impossible. When the trenches are dug and cannons are primed, the time for war has arrived, not education. If the wrong subject is discussed at the wrong time, then the educational program is doomed to failure. So, the Do Nothing Professor can sometimes be a viable option during the life of some public issues.

The Informative Statistician simply presents the statistical facts or lists the rules and regulations and then stops. He doesn't define any problems, recognize any options, or prescribe any solutions. He simply reports what exists. There are times when this approach can be very effective. For example, we have just seen a massive change in the income tax rules under the Economic Recovery Act. Distributing the major rule changes could be an effective program in educating the public to the facts and penalties involved under the new tax laws. This approach may be informative, but it is not designed to facilitate participation in any public decision-making process directly, which is part of the policy education objectives previously stated.

The last four methods acknowledge a public decision-making framework. The Pontifical Prescriber crusades for the adoption of a particular solution to a controversial issue. The Pontifical Prescriber believes that he knows whats best for society, so he prescribes what he believes to be the best solution. Some have suggested that telling the public what is best for them is not education but brainwashing. The consequence of this approach is that

the Pontifical Prescriber is loved by those who agree with him and hated by those who disagree. Therefore, he only reaches a part of his potential audience. Those groups who agree with the prescriber will invite him back. However, those groups who disagree will not extend an invitation in the first place. This is not to say that he doesn't carry some clout. Pontifical Prescribers are often instrumental in swinging public opinion, but they usually aren't interested in developing their audience's ability to make judgements on the basis of a critical examination of the evidence and logical thinking, which is another one of the stated purposes of public policy education.

The first step in the Scientific Optimizer's approach is to establish an evaluation criteria from which the alternative solutions to the problem are to be judged. The Scientific Optimizer's method is effective until the educator encounters an audience which judges the solutions to the problem under discussion from a different set of criteria. More than likely some members of the clientele will have a different value system or a set of circumstances than considered by the educator and therefore will establish a different set of criteria from which to evaluate the solution to the problems. So the scientific optimizer's method can work if the educator employs the criteria established and revealed for an individual or homogeneous group. He can protect his objectivity by providing a conditional response: "If <u>this</u> is your goal, then <u>this</u> is your optimal solution." However, if the group's objectives are not homogeneous or revealed as is the case on many public issues, then some people are likely to disagree with his goals and analysis which reduces his credibility as an educator.

The Analytical Advocate's approach is to define the problem and list the pros and cons or advantages and disadvantages of each alternative solution to

the public problem. On the surface this approach of listing consequences in two columns--pros and cons--seems to be consistent with the public policy education objectives. However, eventually someone in the educator's audience will raise their hand and say, "you've got that consequence in the wrong column." You see, what is pro or advantageous to one individual may be con or disadvantageous to another individual who has different circumstances or a different value system. So again this method is effective only if the educator is dealing with a completely revealed and homogeneous set of clientele circumstances and values. Otherwise, those who have different circumstances and values will disagree with or discredit his analysis, which again tends to reduce his credibility as an educator.

The Alternatives and Consequences Educator first defines the problem, then lists the alternative solutions, and finally presents the probable consequences of each alternative. This approach allows the educator to refrain from making most value judgements and lets the selection of a solution up to the clientele, who may or may not come to a concensus. The objective educator avoids the public disagreements of the three previous "education" methods because the Alternatives and Consequences Educator is indifferent to the final solution preferred by individual audience members. The only thing to disagree with are the facts and predictions. He is the authority on the facts. He is the authority on predicting the probable consequences of the alternative solutions. And, he puts the problem in a decision making framework as a "disinterested" expert. This approach does not offend anyone's values or circumstances in the audience, therefore, the atmosphere is more conducive to learning. So, the alternatives and consequences method can result in a successful public policy education program when diverse values and circumstances of the clientele are involved as they are in most public meetings.

In conclusion, some may wonder what approach to use? In response, most of the methods listed can be used in accordance with the objectives of public policy education under some specific sets of circumstances. The selection is a value judgement that must be made after an appraisal of emotion associated with the public problem and the homogeneity and completeness of the revealed values and circumstances of the clientele. Finally, I once had a student who asked me why I did not reveal my values in class. I responded, "If you really knew my values, then you would know what kind of mess that this world would be in if we followed them."