Outreach Engagement on Controversial Public Issues

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Issues that influence people’s lives are often controversial in nature

- obesity
- teen pregnancy
- the opioid epidemic
- climate change
- GMO’s
- COVID-19
- pesticide spray drift

Conducting educational programs on these topics can put outreach educators in a position where they feel uncomfortable

There is a fear of being labeled as “biased”
Or being criticized for “crossing the line”
Education versus advocacy – is there a line?

If so, where is it drawn, and who draws it?

We can take some of the guesswork out of these problems if we have a framework for categorizing controversial public issues

- The first step is to identify whether the public issue has a direct link to an underlying problem
- An approach to deal with education on a topic like this is to determine the clarity of the underlying problem
- Let’s look at a framework

A typology of public issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type I</th>
<th>Type II</th>
<th>Type III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underlying Problem</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>Clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution to Problem</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>Several alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Potholes in streets</td>
<td>Inadequate school funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let’s think of some Type I, II and III issues that outreach educators face

- How easy is it to identify the underlying problem associated with a public issue?
- What about measuring the clarity of the problem?
Now let’s look at potential roles for government and the general public using our framework – they are the bulk of our clientele.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type I</th>
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<th>Type III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government officials</td>
<td>Implement solution</td>
<td>Publicize alternative solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The public</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Consider proposed solutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Encourage public discussion. 
Increase understanding of the issue.

The public

Again let’s do some examples on issues that may arise:

Some from your own experience
Others you have heard about
Hypothetical ones that might appear in the future

Now let’s look at educator roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type I</th>
<th>Type II</th>
<th>Type III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content Expert</td>
<td>Provide information</td>
<td>Analyze proposed solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Experts</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Facilitate public deliberation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Provide information. 
Analyze proposed solutions. 
Conduct issue research & analysis. 

Facilitate public deliberation. 
Frame the issue in public terms. 
Facilitate public deliberation.

Content expert roles (focus on research and teaching)

• Issue monitor – identify emerging public issues
• Issue researcher – conduct applied research, including public opinion polls
• Information provider – teaching of actual content related to issue/problem

Content expert roles (Continued)

• Technical advisor – interpreting information for stakeholders
• Policy analyst – analyzing policy alternatives with their likely consequences

Process Expert Roles (focus on facilitation)

• Stakeholder analyst – meeting with stakeholder groups to understand their views on the issue
• Meeting convenor/facilitator – bringing stakeholders together to exchange views and build understanding
• Issue framer – finding a way to describe the issue in public terms to increase the chances of public participation
Process Expert Roles

- Public forum convener – developing a process to involve the public in seeking solutions to a public problem
- Forum moderator – facilitating a public discussion to produce deliberation and shared understanding
- Designer/facilitator of a formal dispute resolution process – functioning as part of a trained outreach team in dealing with polarized issues/disputes

Conclusions and Caveats

- Be very careful about using the following terms: scientific, research-based and unbiased. They are all over-rated and over-used. Besides, they can backfire on you, and you don’t need that
- Instead, use the term “evidence”
- Be aware of the limits of your own knowledge and expertise, but if you are staying within those limits, there is no need to be deferential or timid
- “Balance” is NOT necessarily appropriate in educational outreach – can you think of circumstances in your own field where it would or would not be?

References/ Reading


Thanks for attending!
Good luck in your outreach!

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