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## 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

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
### 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?




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### 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


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### A typology of public issues

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Underlying Problem	Clear	Clear	Unclear
Solution to Problem	Clear	Several alternatives	To be discovered
Examples	Potholes in streets	Inadequate school funding	Urban sprawl


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### 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?


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**Now let's look at potential roles for government and the general public using our framework – they are the bulk of our clientele**

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Government officials	Implement solution	Publicize alternative solutions	Encourage public discussion
The public	None	Consider proposed solutions	Increase understanding of the issue - Consider approaches

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**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

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**Now let's look at educator roles**

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Content Expert	Provide information.	Analyze proposed solutions	Conduct issue research & analysis
Process Experts	None	Facilitate public deliberation	Frame the issue in public terms - Facilitate public deliberation

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**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

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**Content expert roles** (Continued)

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

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**Process Expert Roles (focus on facilitation)**

- Stakeholder analyst – meeting with stakeholder groups to understand their views on the issue
- Meeting convener/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

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## Process Expert Roles (Continued)

- 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

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## 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?

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**Thanks for attending!**

**Good luck in your outreach!**

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