

Controversy: Its Positive Role in Education

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Kreitlow, a nationally recognized adult educator, suggests that Extension educators who aren't afraid to test their professional security and who see themselves as leaders and change agents involved in improving the quality of rural and urban life, frequently find themselves in the midst of controversy. He presents a change model that helps us see alternatives for dealing with controversy in the educational environment and describes controversy as a naturally occurring phenomenon and as an input for rapid change. The model also identifies leadership characteristics for dealing with controversy or for using controversy as a means of bringing about change. The author sees controversy as a positive force and an effective tool for an educator. Do you?

This article deals with security, change, leadership, and controversy. If an educator is involved in change, gives viable leadership for proposed programs, or tries to terminate a program, he tests his security and is in or on the edge of controversy.

Is there a way to test your professional security? The traditional "going out on a limb" is viable if you're wise enough to select the limb that will bend without breaking. You don't really test your se-

curity if you go out on a limb so fast you move beyond grabbing distance if you fall. Nor do you test your security if you creep out so slowly that your leadership is invisible.

Professional security is of consequence to the home economist, the family living specialist, and those in women's education, health sciences, or social services. This is especially true if you propose improvement in programs for families outside society's mainstream.

This paper is a summary of a presentation made to Family Living and Health Science Extension personnel at the University of Wisconsin—Extension annual Faculty Conference, October, 1972.

A simple test of your security arises if you question aspects of the traditional Extension system. My own questioning of the 4-H Club award system in the 1930s shook me up a bit. Extension specialists in some states got involved in public policy discussions in the early 1940s and felt their security wane. In the 1950s, some home economists in the Midwest got out of the kitchen and sewing room and into such controversial issues as school district reorganization and the township system of local government. They were tested!

I'm wondering how many home economics and health science staff are ready to open the door to countywide consumer studies of food additives? Ready to start study groups on birth control methods? Ready to work with planned parenthood groups for displays and exhibits at county fairs? Has Extension at the county or local level organized seminars on abortion?

What role has Extension played in examining pollution of the air by automobiles or of the streams and lakes by chemical fertilizers, barnyards, and septic systems or of pollution of food by weed and insect control measures? To what extent have Extension's adult educators gone beyond dealing with their middle-class, mainstream constituents to develop programs to help low-income families adapt to government housing programs?

Security can even be tested by trying to cooperate with the public welfare agencies in working with

welfare clients. Extension agents in urban areas can test their security if they work with the problems caused by the changing roles of women. Is Extension willing to promote the establishment of day-care, child development programs in large business buildings and state office buildings and in factories where hundreds and at times even thousands of women work a 40-hour week?

Any one of these examples has the potential of putting an adult educator's security to the test. Even though Extension tries to operate on a grass-roots planning principle, the Extension agent's security can be tested in working with county Agricultural and Extension Education Committees by making any of the above or similar suggestions at a county planning meeting. The committee member who objects to a suggestion may be able to cause the insecure adult educator to back down by saying, "You're not going to get into that, are you?" or "From whom did you get the idea that Extension can do that in this county?" or "That problem should be left to someone else."

Not responding to statements of this kind in the confines of a committee meeting would just as surely destroy the potential program as would planting your heels firmly under the table and shooting back with, "Yes, we're going to get into it. It's high time we did it whether you like it or not!" or "I've been talking to the people on welfare and this is the program they

want!" or "The state staff are pushing this this year and we've got to get with it!"

There may be times when backing down or planting your heels is the proper role. The problem the Extension agent has is to determine when this is the appropriate action or if other action is more productive. It's well for those in Extension to keep in mind certain assumptions: (1) you're a professional educator, (2) as an educator you're an agent of change, (3) you're a person with your own values and goals, and (4) you can't totally separate your personal and professional values and characteristics in your work.

The discussion thus far suggests that controversy comes out of proposed changes. As controversy occurs, it needs to be dealt with. How, then, do you deal with controversial issues that arise through Extension? I've always been a person that needs a bit of structure to

hold to. In this situation, I prefer to follow the theoretical model pictured in Figure 1. It helps us see alternatives in dealing with controversy in the educational environment.

Therefore, the rest of this article does two things. First, it describes the change model and the potential points of controversy as a naturally occurring phenomenon and as an input for rapid change. Secondly, it identifies leadership characteristics for dealing with controversy or for using controversy as a means of change. In this setting, I'm not talking about the confrontation politics noted in the last decade. Yet, confrontation politics is related to the model.

Process of Change and Role of Controversy

When a community or an organization changes, it very often re-

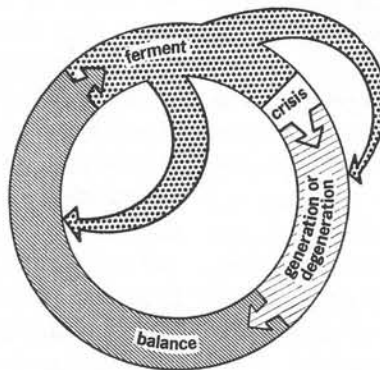


Figure 1. Periods and conditions of organizational change.

peats the process that has occurred before. Yet each time there's a change, participants believe they're part of a new phenomenon. Figure 1 demonstrates this in terms of a cyclical process. It would be well to picture in your own mind your county or your organization as you examine the figure. Each has had periods of balance and stability in the past. Each has gone through ferment. Crises that have occurred have been approached head-on or have been bypassed. Following the crisis experience, spurts of new growth or a decline have taken place in the organization or the institution. And then on to a new balance.

As you examine each of the four key segments of the model, picture the different leadership role that's required for maximum effectiveness by the educator. In the period of balance, the leadership can be a stable hand at the helm, thus, trying to maintain the balance. Also possible is a leadership that shows dissatisfaction with the status quo and needles the system toward a new phase.

This model can be compared to wine making. The leader who's the needler is the one who drops the yeast into the must.

In the period of ferment, we again have different leadership roles. One leader can be the integrator of forces for positive change—the brewmaster for the organization. Or another can be a person wanting to return to the good old days and stop the ferment by throwing in a bit of

sulphite. Another can be a leader spokesman around whom other forces gather to forge ahead (putting in some additional nutrient).

As we approach the crisis situation in this model of organizational change, we again can see alternate leadership roles. One can be the person in command who sees roads past the pressure points and can lead around them. Or, it can be the type of leader who's effective in carrying out a plan with such dispatch that he cuts through the crisis cleanly.

Following the crisis is a period of generation or degeneration. This often requires a person who can build when there's a tendency to relax. Or it may require a leadership that can close out a program or an activity (or an agency) with dispatch when its day is done.

Controversies can occur at any of the stages identified, but most likely they'll appear in the ferment stage and carry through the point of crisis.

It's well to note within this model that there's a way to back-track out of ferment and into a period of balance. As you're thinking of your own agency, I'm sure you can identify a period in time when it has moved into ferment and then back to "the good old days."

Leadership Characteristics for Dealing with Controversy

The practical question the adult educator is likely to ask is, "What do I do when my county or my or-

ganization is in a period of ferment or has a crisis approaching?" My suggestion is that the educator rely on several leadership principles as a framework for selecting the appropriate action for his organization or county. Five principles are of particular significance for leadership in this setting.

The first is the principle of challenge. This turns decision making and problem solving into an operation faced directly by clientele of the agency or by members of the organization. These processes are done *with*, rather than *for*, clients. This means that you encourage rather than turn off client efforts to deal with the ferment or to deal with the crisis. It may, indeed, be challenging for the adult educator to try to resolve all of the problems himself; but unless he's operating in a more autocratic environment than the literature of Extension suggests, it doesn't seem appropriate.

The second principle is that of participation, sharing, and process. This principle should be old hat for Extension which, in its early days, thrived on grass-roots programming and participant involvement. Somehow, the more specialized individuals and society become, the easier it is to forget that man understands or supports things he helped originate. The home economist and the health scientist need to provide the opportunities for clients to originate ideas and get involved in establishing programs. The participating person becomes the knowledgeable person.

The third principle is that of knowledge. Here the adult educator clearly recognizes that he has to know something about what he's doing. It's not enough to have a high grade-point average in college to work effectively with organizational or community controversy. He needs to know the basis for change and the content of change. He needs to know the process by which problem solving can be helped. The principle of knowledge is tied directly to the subject matter on which some controversies are based, to the knowledge of social structure of an organization, and to the social process through which an agency or organization is likely to entangle itself in making its next moves.

The fourth principle is that of purpose and direction. This isn't necessarily the purpose and direction provided by the Extension agent who, indeed, must know where he's going and the alternate routes to get there. It's creating a setting in which purpose and direction can be identified with the help of the users of the Extension system. The home economist who's in limbo floating along with a stream of county traditions is abdicating this principle just as surely as one who dictates to a noninvolved client group.

Flexibility is the final principle. In spite of the other principles and the security you can get by operating from the base they provide, no two regions, no two counties, no two communities, no two organiza-

tions are exactly alike. Each requires adjustment by the professional educator to deal with differences. As an individual, whether a home economist, ag agent, resource agent, or an Extension specialist in nursing care, you need to know your own range and operate within it. Your own flexibility and your own range often need expanding. This can be done through self-study, but with the vast resources of most university extension systems, it should be part of the staff development program.

An Extension agent's unwillingness to change is an invitation to broken programs in dealing with controversy. You can be burned by planting your feet too tightly on old ground and just as easily end your effectiveness by too readily floating with the stream. Both actions are signs of ineffective leadership, one inflexible, one not even leadership.

So what's the role of the home economist, the ag agent, the youth agent in dealing with controversial issues that arise as agencies and organizations change? There's a viable platform for the change agent and that platform is *involvement*. To believe that as a professional educator you're above county, community, or institutional controversy is to ignore your own professional responsibility and leave the decisions to others.

The Extension agent's platform includes studying the change taking place, judging the roles required, judging the roles you can capably handle, and seeking out others to take those roles beyond your capa-

bilities. When a community is in ferment and you're committed to education, you'll be your own motivator for continual learning and develop the base on which you can lead at the appropriate time.

I'm suggesting that any person worthy of being called an Extension agent needs to accept a responsibility for providing leadership as organizations move through their cycles of change. If your agency is moving to programs working with the disadvantaged, and you yourself aren't prepared, your inadequacies will be recognized. Educators need to keep up with their agency.

An aspect of the principle of knowledge exists here. It suggests that you keep abreast of your own characteristics and your own hang-ups, be they subject matter, morals, ethics, politics, or economics. You should be aware of how they interfere with what you're willing and able to do. If you have a moral "hang-up" about family planning, you won't be very effective in curtailing the county's birth rate or even your own. If you're a militant, individualistic, free enterpriser, you won't do much about saving the ecology.

For the programs of change you're prepared for, get involved. For the changes you aren't prepared for, prepare yourself.

I once found some very practical suggestions in a conference summary on methods of handling controversial issues. In addition to some reference to the principles identified earlier, six important ingredients

were noted. I've found them helpful and practical in dealing with controversy arising out of the process of change.

1. We must get the facts to handle controversial issues intelligently. Without facts, the major issue may be missed. With facts, the major issue may disappear. Knowing what's behind an issue, its present status, and potential outcomes if no solution is found will help the community and its leaders focus on the issue rather than on the people involved.
2. Handling controversial issues is a step-by-step, logical process, often charged with emotions that get in the way of an orderly procedure. Solutions to problems come when enough understanding of them is reached. Often this understanding can't come until steps have been taken to build background knowledge, remove the issue from the persons involved, and see that a start can be made in resolving it.
3. We should look for alternative courses of action to those initially proposed. The first ideas aren't necessarily the best. In fact, each idea for solution can be a stimulator of other ideas. When alternative actions are looked at in terms of value to the community or its citizens, the alternative selected is likely to be one developed as a result of building

on to those suggested early in the controversy.

4. It's a good idea to get people other than those directly involved to participate. The person standing on the outside of the ring often has a better sense of perspective than those inside. Alternatives can be more objectively weighed. Those not directly involved often see aspects of the controversy that direct participants see only after they've been pointed out.
 5. The channels of communications need to be opened to the total organization. Without clear communication, an issue may never really be solved. Some organizations have tried to resolve the same issue many times because no one knew that the first, second, or third attempt was made. You don't settle problems in a communications vacuum.
 6. Controversy can challenge people to learn. The reaction "something has to be done" is the first stage in seeking an answer to "what can be done?"
- Extension agents who deal positively with change and lead effectively through ferment and crisis stand out as contributors to the well-being of both rural and urban life. If you don't see yourself as a leader, as a change agent, as a person involved in improving the quality of rural and urban life, or if you're afraid of getting involved in something controversial, then Extension

shouldn't really be your job. It would be better to find something where you're expected to follow instead of lead. It's next to impossible to fade into the woodwork if your role is to enrich life through education.

To enrich life through the Extension system demands leadership.

As a leader, you'll get involved in controversy. There's nothing more stimulating! Looking at controversy in the community, the county, or the region leads to the conclusion that it shouldn't be feared. I would fear more the stillness of thought that would occur if Extension didn't squarely face the problems of today.