

Determining Extension's Role in Controversial Issues: Content, Process, Neither, or Both?

Abstract

Controversial issues offer Extension faculty opportunities to facilitate community dialogue and apply conflict resolution strategies to help communities achieve higher ground. Handled appropriately, the long-term benefits to the community, the Extension organization, and the faculty member of facilitating public issues outweigh the costs. This article explores Extension's place in facilitating public issues dialogue and provides an initial first step in the decision-making process regarding what Extension's role should be. An approach is proposed that can help faculty decide whether to respond to an issue with content, process, or a more comprehensive approach.

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Introduction

Most of us have experienced the following scenarios. Individuals gathered around a critical issue, muddling through a discussion with no clear direction or understanding of how the discussion should be directed or what the group should do. Opposing sides only know that they do not like what the other members are suggesting. Or groups meet and struggle to reach consensus on a solution despite good intentions and similar interests. In both cases, emotions escalate, harsh words pepper the discussion, and assumptions are shared as fact. The entire public discussion often disintegrates, and a resolution is seldom achieved.

Whether an issue appears simple on the surface or has a myriad of facets with the potential to impact thousands of stakeholders, individuals discussing a controversial topic will often express opposing positions and seek ways to build a case on why the other side is wrong. As Extension professionals serving communities, our role can be to help audiences transform diverse positions into a defined set of interests, thus guiding the group from common ground to higher ground.

Over the last several years a variety of controversial issues have offered Extension faculty an opportunity to facilitate community dialogue and apply conflict resolution strategies. Proposed uranium mining, fracking, and interstate pipeline construction represent three examples. In many cases that involve controversial issues, however, it is our opinion that Extension responds by distancing itself from the issue(s) rather than engaging the community. This article explores

Extension's place in facilitating public issues dialogue, proposes an initial first step in the decision-making process regarding whether or not Extension has a role to play, and stimulates thought regarding how Extension can assist communities faced with controversial issues.

The Approaches

Contention, controversy, or conflict exists when one's personal wishes or beliefs differ from those of another person. It is a normal part of our lives and, in most cases, is driven by: a) a different understanding of the data or facts related to the topic, b) values that align on opposite ends of the spectrum, c) interests that are not expressed or clarified, and d) relationships that are ignored or strained because of lack of respect and/or trust. Dukes, Pischolish, and Stephens (2000) found that disputes involve more than clashes of self-interests but are also struggles for identity, recognition, power, and status. In addition, Kettering Foundation (2011, para. 1) observed that "citizens may recognize that what is happening to them isn't good, yet not agree about what would be better. They may even disagree about the nature of the issue that is confronting them."

Our goal in working with groups in the midst of conflict is to understand what the drivers or motivators are for the conflict and help the parties: a) create an environment where interests are stated, b) focus on principled behavior, and c) reach a good agreement. If this environment is not established and the conflict is unresolved, emotions continue to be strained, communication is halted, energy is diverted, progress is stalled, and relationships are broken (Dukes et al., 2000). Similarly, Kettering Foundation identified three keys to doing "choice work" with groups, assuming that those involved have agreed to work toward a decision: a) recognize the experiences and concerns of all participants, b) identify those that are, and are not, acceptable, and c) provide all options and views a fair hearing.

Controversial situations do have advantages. Through the conflict, groups have an opportunity to identify problems or injustices; improve understanding and access to resources; create innovative solutions; reconsider previous decisions; improve relationships; and improve standards, regulations, and policies. Overall, conflict pushes groups to engage stakeholders; build civic capacity; and invest in social, intellectual, and political capital. When the best process is used to facilitate the group's conversation, good agreements are reached. Furthermore, Kettering Foundation (2011) determined that the likelihood of making sound decisions increases when people deliberately weigh all of their options against what they consider most valuable for their collective well-being.

Fisher and Ury (2011) defined the characteristics of a good agreement as being wise, fair, efficient, lasting, and leading to the improvement of—or at least does not damage—the parties' relationship. There is a process to get to this level of agreement, and it begins by defining the shared purpose and expectations of the discussion and the outcomes of the dialogue. However, the standard strategies for holding a discussion on a controversial issue will leave people dissatisfied, worn out, and alienated. Traditionally, leaders will apply positional bargaining using either soft or hard techniques to move groups toward an agreement. Soft negotiators want to avoid conflict, will make concessions, and then feel bitter about the agreement. Hard negotiators push back with no concessions and little concern for relationships. Neither of these is effective (Fisher & Ury, 2011).

The Harvard Negotiation Project (Fisher & Ury, 2011) identified principled negotiation as another alternative. Principled negotiation establishes expected group behaviors for reaching higher ground,

allowing groups to decide issues on their merits rather than through a haggling process. During the principled negotiation process, individuals are separated from the problem, interests become the focus instead of positions, multiple options are generated before settling on an agreement, and facts along with objective criteria are used to reach an agreement.

Dukes et al. (2000) proposed basic tools for finding the higher ground by setting shared expectations or a covenant that define the shared aspirations and ground rules that are vital for the decision-making process. Shared expectations involve establishing the need, educating and inspiring the participants, defining the vision, promoting participation, envisioning the outcomes, assigning accountability, and evaluating and revising the process based on the needs of the group. Negotiators or facilitators must operate from "principled ground," which is a "deep commitment to civil behavior that both demonstrates and invites respect, trust, recognition, and relatedness leading to sustainable relationships" (Dukes et al., 2000, p. 60-63). Principled behaviors allow the truth to be expressed and honored, integrity to be valued, trust to be given, and new ground that was previously unimagined to be explored and discovered.

The Extension Practice

Contributors to the *Journal of Extension* have explored Extension's role in controversial public issues for at least the past 30 years. For example, Barrows (1984, para. 5) stated "Extension should be involved in education on public policy issues...Extension is publicly funded for the specific purpose of applying the knowledge of the land-grant university to improve the quality of life of the people." Fiske (1991) observed that involvement in controversial issues ultimately increased Extension's visibility and credibility in the eyes of state, tribal, and local government. Cooley (1994) observed that, when Extension agents facilitate processes for groups working with conflict-laden situations and do so in ways that emphasize learning rather than teaching, education results. Patton and Blaine (2001) presented a thought-provoking public issues typology to guide Extension faculty faced with potential involvement in public issues. Welch and Braunworth (2010) observed that, because of Extension's interdisciplinary nature and its credibility within communities, it is well-positioned to address complex, controversial issues.

Extension faculty have legitimate concerns about becoming involved with complex, controversial issues. Time is a valuable commodity and often in short supply. It is difficult for faculty to find the time to develop a process and properly facilitate a dialogue that can potentially last weeks, months, or even years until a resolution is reached. Welch and Braunworth (2010, Conclusion, para. 2) observed that the "investment of time, energy and emotion in such projects is great. The margin for error is small, and pressure from interest groups is high." Faculty are also justifiably concerned about alienating current and prospective Extension clientele, jeopardizing relationships with community leaders and local government representatives (Zacharakis, 2006), and/or perceived "guilt by association" that comes from working with interest groups (Welch & Braunworth, 2010).

Many faculty members prefer working behind the scenes and are not comfortable dealing with controversy or the attention that accompanies it. Faculty may also express an intent to "let the system work." The public hearing process that provides an opportunity for citizen input to local government officials is one example. As Patton and Blaine (2001) observed, however, the attempt to

hear what the public wants through public hearings has often become counter-productive. Many public hearings have dissolved into contests to see who can bring the most partisans to the meeting and, once there, to see who can express their opinion the loudest. In these cases, local government officials have looked to Extension—or other sources—for assistance with facilitating a public involvement process (Patton & Blaine, 2001).

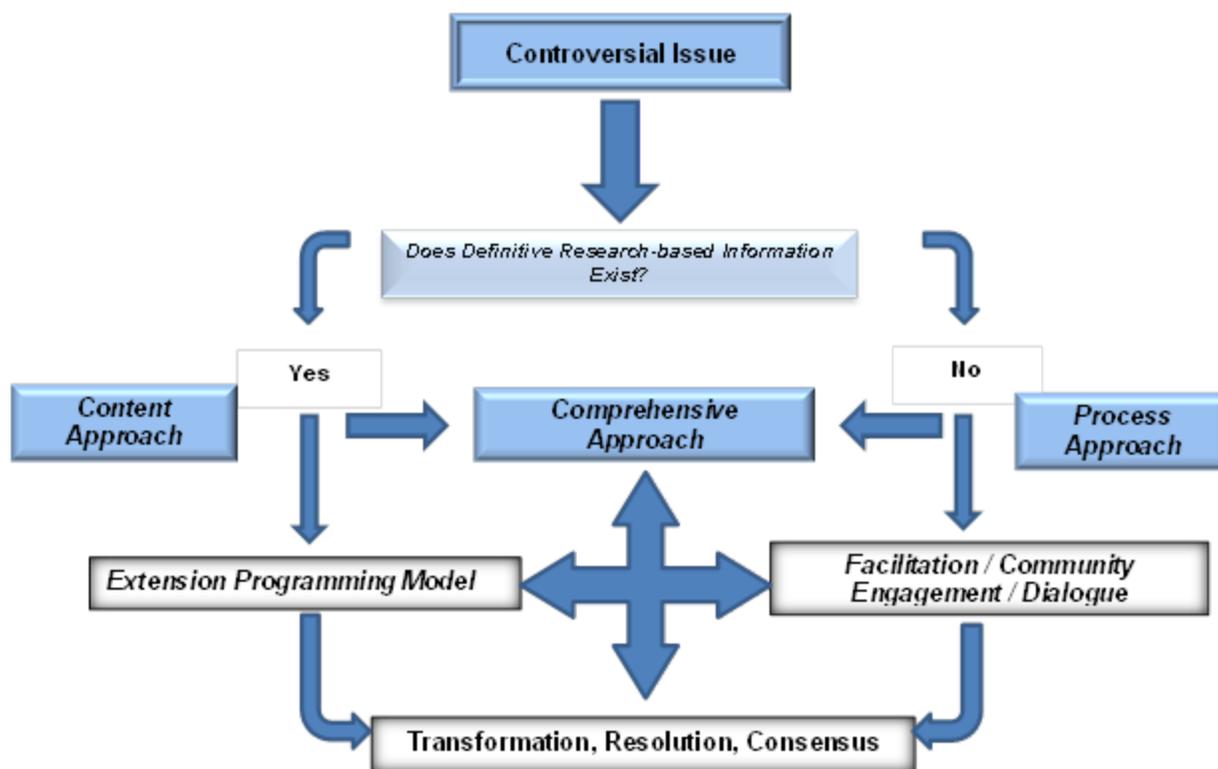
In the face of these complexities, Extension faculty are asking if there is a systematic way to decide when to take the content path, when to choose the process path, or when to apply a more comprehensive approach.

A First Step

How then does an Extension professional decide whether to become involved in a controversial public issue, and in what way? We propose the following thought process for faculty to consider when an issue begins to arise (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

A Thought Process for Extension Faculty Considering Their Potential Role in Controversial Public Issues



Content Approach

This process begins by asking the question: "is there definitive research-based information on this topic?" If the answer is "yes," then faculty can play the role of content expert and provide factual information to help clientele achieve informed decision-making. Or they can go a step further and implement the Extension Programming Process to address concerns with educational programming

that helps clients achieve positive outcomes.

Process Approach

Quite commonly, if definitive research-based information is not available on a particular issue, or the complex problem involves dueling scientists, Extension faculty step back from the issue and take no role. When "facts" alone are not enough to resolve an issue, the conflict usually invokes deeply held human values—the most challenging situation. In these cases, we encourage faculty to set aside personal discomfort to focus on what is in the best interest of the community. Consider if there is an opportunity, as a facilitator, to help the community reach consensus or achieve higher ground and apply the behaviors (Dukes et al., 2000) that utilize principled negotiation theory (Fisher & Ury, 2011). If the skills to lead this type of engagement are lacking, the Extension educator would seek support from an external facilitator or mediator who understands the facilitation process.

Comprehensive Approach

When the issue is laced with potential for conflict and there is also research-based information available, Extension educators will apply a more comprehensive approach. Listening intently to the goals of the group (Covey, 1990), the agent will: build an understanding of the issue; assist the group in defining the shared expectations and clarifying the interests and positions; schedule presentations by those who have content knowledge; lead discussions on the values, interests, and vision held by the group; and ultimately support the group in applying principled behaviors that guide the members to reaching consensus and building stronger working relationships.

Conclusion

Handled appropriately, the long-term benefits to the community, the Extension organization, and the faculty member of facilitating public issues outweigh the costs. Proper training and sound judgment will be critical to success in this role (Patton & Blaine, 2001). In cases where faculty do not feel that they have the skills or time to be successful in this endeavor, a dedicated Community Viability or Community Resource Development Extension professional skilled at facilitation could assist with leading the dialogue and/or lead in-service training sessions that provide faculty with improved facilitation skills and confidence. In either case, reflecting on the availability of definitive research-based information in the early stages can help faculty determine whether to respond with content, respond with process, or implement a comprehensive approach.

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Recommendations for Further Reading

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