



Social and Economic
Education for
Development

Community Issues Gatherings: A Way to Stimulate Critical Thinking and Thoughtful Public Talk About Controversial Issues

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November, 1994

University of Kentucky

Cooperative Extension Service

PROBLEMS WITH LOCAL ISSUES

"Fighting over our problems leaves us with polarized positions, and fleeing only allows our problems to grow larger."

Paul Martin DuBois and Frances Moore Lappe
Focus On Study Circles, Fall 1991

Extension agents and others involved in community development are often involved in helping people deal with controversial issues that require some deliberation or critical thinking on the part of the community members. For action to occur, discussions of action choices must not destroy existing relationships. Rather, the discussions should help build a sense of "we", where public knowledge emerges and people move towards a common ground.

However, all too often the reality is quite different. Too often discussions are not productive. In these cases, discussions become arguments and then controversies which contribute little to build a sense of "we." This is likely to happen when:

- 1) It is a battle between two groups that involves name-calling or bitter power contests.
- 2) It builds barriers between people and groups who are likely to have to work together to accomplish other community goals.
- 3) It involves relatively little deliberation or "thinking through" the issue to examine the various alternatives and consequences.

As a result, people line up within their perceived ideological camps -- liberal, conservative, Republican, Democrat, pro-environment, pro-industry -- rather than critically examine the choices involved in addressing the issue. They don't examine the problems behind their favorite choices, look at the strengths of ideas they don't like, or consider new ideas.

These three problems may it difficult for public knowledge to emerge where we understand our connections, others' perspectives and the consequences of the options before us. To make a reasoned choice as a "public" there must be a mutual understanding of the issues as well as each others' values and interests. We need to explore opportunities to move towards a common purpose and direction.

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TURNING LEMONS INTO LEMONADE

The dysfunctional elements in public controversies can be turned around to build empathy, understanding and critical thinking among the public. Many community leaders may lack the tools to build constructive and thoughtful dialogue among diverse groups in the community. The proposed methodology for "public talk" has been used to stimulate deliberation in hundreds of rural and urban Community Issues Gatherings that have been held in Kentucky as part of the Kellogg Foundation funded Appalachian Civic Leadership

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Project. The Issues Gatherings borrow from the methodologies of the Study Circles Resource Network and the National Issues Forums. They are designed to help people think through the choices and to move towards a "common ground."

HOMEWORK PRIOR TO THE COMMUNITY ISSUE GATHERINGS

Before the public discusses a controversial issue, some homework must be done by a small committee or group. The role of this committee is to reframe the issue in ways that might be helpful for deliberative public talk. The committee attempts to answer several major questions:

- 1) What is the real issue that needs more public discussion? Is that the real issue or is there an issue underneath the issue?
- 2) Who is most likely to be affected by this issue and why?
- 3) Who is the least likely to be affected by this issue and why?
- 4) What are the alternatives for dealing with this issue. Brainstorm as many ideas as possible.
- 5) Can these alternatives be framed into three or four major public policy choices? If so, what are the major choices? Have any of the

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choices worked elsewhere? Ideally, the choices should reflect the diversity of thought in the community about how to solve the problem.

- 6) Is the issue framed in ways that are likely to divide the community? If so, the issue might be re-framed as a problem question or statement that reflects diverse interests (rather than positions) in a community? For example, the issue may be initially framed as "Should we have zoning or not?". This question may lead to two positional stands in the community that sets the stage for a major community battle. If the question is changed to "How can we best manage our land for economic growth and still maintain our small town flavor?" it may stimulate more problem-solving approaches rather than divide people into ideological camps.

It is likely that the issue framing committee will not be able to answer all these questions on their own. There are three major sources for information: 1) the local library; 2) the stakeholders -- the people who are most affected by the issue; and 3) "experts" or technicians who understand the technical components of the problem or they may have a "scholar's perspective" about the problem and the public policy choices for addressing the issue. The latter two groups may be interviewed individually or in focus group settings of 6 to 10 people. While interviewing these individuals, the issue framers should behave in a neutral way and probing way. The issue framing committee might argue among themselves in private meetings. But they should behave as fair-minded researchers who are trying to get the heart of the problem and the major policy choices for addressing the issue.

WRITING AN ISSUE BRIEF

After the information is collected, the issue framers can write a three to ten page brief that describes the problem and outlines the policy choices for addressing the problem. The reader should be offered adequate technical information without being overwhelmed. The problem should be presented in a way that respects those with diverse opinions or stands about the issue. The issue framer should avoid offering only two policy choices because an either/or

proposal may further divide the community. Rather, the framers should describe three or four public policy choices for dealing with the problem. If more than four major choices are discussed, the reader is likely to get bogged down into too much detail. While the choices may not be mutually exclusive, they should be distinct.

Each choice must be presented in a balanced way to encourage a fair-minded discussion. For example, it would be inappropriate to describe one choice in glowing terms and the other two choices with lukewarm language. It would not be considered fair if one devoted three pages to one choice and only one page to others. The issue framers should avoid labeling choices in ideological terms that would further divide the community. Certainly, one would never describe the choices as Republican, Democrat, liberal, conservative or middle-of-the-road.

In addition to a description of the choices, the issue brief may also contain some questions that might be posed in a community issues gathering.

EVALUATING THE ISSUE BRIEF

After the first draft is prepared, the issue framers should ask readers to evaluate the issue brief for:

1) An adequate presentation of facts and technical information about the problem and the choices.

Readers are asked if they have adequate facts to understand the problem? Do you need more facts or technical information? Is there too much technical information? What else might you need to know to understand the choices?

2) Fair-mindedness

Readers can be asked if they think the writer favors one choice more than the others? If so, what choice do you think he/she likes the most? Are each of the choices described in a fair-minded way? Why or why not?

3) Understanding or readability.

Is the issue brief written in language that is easy to read? Is the writing too complex or too simple? Is there any kind of language

that you find offensive? If so, what is the problem?

Responses to these and other questions may lead to some revisions of the issue brief. Some briefs have been printed in the local paper or presented on the local radio or cable television before the discussion begins. Copies can be distributed throughout the community or to a targeted group.

SETTING THE STAGE BEFORE THE ISSUE GATHERING:

After the brief is developed and refined, community issue gathering leaders attempt to create or nurture a setting where open discussion can occur. Ideally, the setting should be comfortable for the participants. It should be a place where everyone feels safe to take the time to strengthen their critical thinking and democratic problem solving skills.¹ In some cases, the local Courthouse or a library may be viewed as alien to participants. The volunteer fire station, someone's home or a restaurant where people gather for coffee to discuss issues may be considered more appropriate. Generally, chairs are arranged in a semi-circle or in a way that everyone can see each other. Rather than attempt to hold a large issue gathering where people may feel lost in the crowd, several gatherings may be conducted with groups of thirty people or less. Potlucks or other kinds of food and refreshments are often integrated into the Gatherings to create a hospitable atmosphere. Personal invitations are extended rather than exclusive reliance on newspaper or mass mailings. A hospitality and invitations committee can handle many of the details.

SUGGESTED RULES FOR THE GATHERING:

To encourage open discussion and critical thinking, the moderator suggests several rules for a healthy discussion. The rules are posted on flip chart paper in the meeting space and are listed in the following box. Some participants may want to add extra guidelines such as "no smoking" or a time for adjournment.

Issue Gathering Rules

- 1) Moderators guide the discussion but moderators and scribes remain neutral.
- 2) Everyone is encouraged to participate. No one should dominate.
- 3) Our discussion should focus on issue and choices that brought us here.
- 4) We agree to disagree with ideas, not put each other down.
- 5) We listen to each other and respect each other.

SUGGESTED GOALS FOR THE GATHERING:

The moderator suggests several goals for the meeting that are posted on flip chart paper. "After the meeting is completed, we should be able to:

- 1) Identify the range of choices for dealing with this issue and recognize common ground on which we agree.
- 2) Make a good case for positions we disagree with; be able to critique our favorite choices and consider new choices we haven't thought of before.
- 3) Understand that other people have reasons for their choices and their reasons are not dumb, immoral or unreasonable.
- 4) Recognize that our own understanding of an issue is not complete until we understand why others feel the way they do.
- 5) Understand the values and beliefs that underlie the issue and the choices."
- 6) Participants may want to change some goals or add new ones.

STARTING THE ISSUE GATHERING:

Generally the issue is summarized by a neutral party in a 10 to 12 minute time frame. The three or four choices for addressing the issue are highlighted. Each choice is posted on a large flip chart paper. There is a flip chart paper posted with the question "Choice #4?" or "Choice #5?" in case there is a choice that has not emerged in the initial research.

ANALYZING THE HIGHLIGHTS OF EACH CHOICE:

After the issue is summarized and the choices are clear, the discussion leader asks some key questions about each choice:

- 1) **What would the proponents of this choice say?** Why would they choose this alternative? You may not believe in this choice but if you had to walk in the shoes of its defenders, what would they say?
- 2) **What would opponents of this choice say?** Why would they choose this alternative?
- 3) **Who might gain or profit the most if this choice were selected?** Who would lose the most if the choice were implemented?
- 4) **What are the key values that defenders of this choice hold?** Are their values different from people who would oppose this choice?

A scribe should record the comments on separate sheets marked "Choice #1 -- Defenders" or "Choice #1 -- Critics" and so on for subsequent choices. These recorded comments become the group's visual memory. After each of the three or four choices have been examined, the discussion leader asks if there is a fourth or fifth choice that has not been considered before.

BRINGING THE IDEAS HOME:

After all the major choices have been considered, the discussion leader can ask questions to bring the group towards a sense of common ground:

1. Now that we've considered this issue, how do we see the problem?
2. What are the concerns we have about resolving this issue one way or another? Have we considered the downsides of each choice?
3. Given that each of us is motivated by beliefs and values that are important to us, how can we redefine the issue in a way that respects our values? Are there values that we feel any public policy on this issue must represent?

4. Are there ways of resolving the issue that we can reject because the consequences are unacceptable?
5. Is there a general way of proceeding that would address everyone's most serious concerns and protect the things we care about deeply?
6. Concluding questions: What have we learned here today? Do you want to meet again? Do you want to act on this issue now? If so, how?

Usually, the discussion leader asks the group if they abided by the guidelines for discussion they set and if they met any of their meeting goals.

Some Moderator Dos and Don'ts:

- The moderator and scribe must always behave in a neutral way during the entire discussion.
- Help the group explore deeper dimensions of the issue, such as trade-offs or how people in different situations might feel about the issue or the choices.
- The scribe attempts to summarize the major ideas and stops the discussion (if needed) to make sure the ideas are recorded accurately.
- The moderator does not let anyone dominate or assume an "expert" role.
- The moderator does not allow the group to drift away from the task at hand. There may be a need for someone to serve as a timekeeper.
- The moderator does not talk too much or insert his/her personal views and feelings.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Community Issue Gatherings have been used in a variety of ways. For example, some groups have had a series of meetings over several

weeks because they wanted to spend about one to two hours examining each choice. Other Issues Gatherings are conducted within a two-hour time frame. Below are a list of other strategies used in issue gatherings.

- Discussion leaders have used the Gathering approach creatively. Some have led Gatherings on the radio with local call-ins (so the sick and shut-ins could participate) and a live studio audience. Others have led Gatherings on cable TV or in people's homes in conjunction with potluck suppers.
- Some have used them for non-controversial issues such as pasture management choices in order to encourage more creative and critical thinking among farmers.
- The Gatherings can lead to a climate of active tolerance where people appreciate each other's differences and learn from each other.
- The Gatherings have been used by low-income groups, the mentally ill, teenagers, women or other groups that have felt left out of the political process in order to stimulate the capacity of their members to address difficult problems.
- At their worst, the Gatherings are merely interesting intellectual exercises if they don't address issues that local people want to work on or learn more about.
- Each group needs to be respected for what it wants to do. Some groups want to study and learn about issues. Other groups will want to take immediate action after the Gathering. The discussion leader should never push a group in one direction or another.

Rather, citizens can learn to think through the consequences of each choice and who might gain or lose the most if a public policy alternative might be carried out. This understanding about differences can set the stage for a sense of "we" or "common ground" to emerge. It can lead to creative problem-solving where everyone's interests and ideas are respected.

Indeed, democratic problem-solving requires deliberative or critical thinking about difficult and controversial public problems. It requires respect

for diversity of thought and true listening. The gatherings provide a structure to meet that end.

At a recent gathering, one of the participants observed with amazement "none of the choices are perfect...there are trade-offs with each choice." In essence, the structure of the gatherings can alter public posturing about certain public policy choices. The gatherings lead to a better understanding of the trade-offs associated with each choice. No one is asked to give up their values or to neglect their self interests for the "common good."

¹See "Community Free Spaces: Creating and Nurturing Schools of Democracy," by Betty S. King and Ronald J. Hustedde in Journal of Extension, Volume XXXI, Winter 1993, pp. 10-12.

For Further Information/Materials About Public Issues Choice Work:

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