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THYSS TOWN SIMULATION

Luane J. Lange, University of Connecticut
Timothy W. Kelsey, Pennsylvania State University

With observations from
Lois M. Frey, University of Vermont
Otto C. Doering, Purdue University

The “Thyss Town Simulation” was developed in response to 1995 National Public Policy Education Conference evaluations, which indicated a desire for the inclusion of interactive and hands-on sessions. This Public Issues Education (PIE) teaching tool provides an opportunity for session/workshop participants to experience the use of resource information and local decisionmaking interactions in order to address local fiscal issues. It provided 1996 conference attendees an opportunity to experience one local decisionmaking process. It created a situation for attendees to increase their understanding of local fiscal factors and to experience in small measure the involvement of diverse stakeholders.

The conference’s multilevel (federal, state, county and local) topic of the changing role of federalism provided an opportunity to incorporate audience participation. Three presenters [see previous sections in printed proceedings] addressed the changing roles of government at the federal, state and county levels and provided the conceptual framework for addressing potential local changes. Then the simulation of local-level issues followed in order to illustrate the differences in solutions and interactions that occur between communities.

The inclusion of simulation as an educational methodology enabled individuals experienced as policy analysts and adult educators to participate as if they were local decisionmakers, thus gaining insights on group problem-solving interactions. The development of the content *and* process elements were important to the success of this simulation as a Public Issues Education tool.

Within Cooperative Extension programming, Public Issues Education includes a variety of models. Several elements are basic to the framework on which issue action/resolution educational programming is designed. These include:

- The ability to identify sensitive issues;
- The understanding of—or ability to develop understanding of—the environment in which an issue is evolving;
- The involvement of diverse resources and stakeholders as key contributors to the problem-solving process; and

- The maintenance of a neutral position, personally and as an organization.

The simulation's objectives were (1) to increase awareness of public policy researchers' and educators' understandings of public issue problem-solving and (2) to provide a Public Issues Education tool that can enable local groups to "try on" the process through role playing the resolution of a contentious issue.

The simulation can be done in one hour, although this limits the role play and can cut the simulation's effectiveness. The debriefing following the role play is important, to enable observers and participants to discuss the issues and the processes each group used to develop a solution.

At the 1996 conference, it became necessary to shorten the time allotted to the simulation. This cut the discussion of the simulation as a Public Issues Education teaching tool.

Evaluations of the simulation indicated that the tool had definite supporters and detractors. This had been expected. But, since there was limited discussion about the use of simulation, its potential for current public issue education programming or faculty/staff development remains unanswered.

Observer Insights

Two simulation observers provided the following insights about this particular teaching tool and the general use of simulation within the context of Public Issues Education.

■ Thyss Town Simulation:

LOIS FREY: Members of the Thyss Town Budget Committee(s) deliberated in a civil manner, modeling excellent group behavior as they contemplated five major issues for the FY 1997 budget. In each of the groups, one member stepped forward and assumed a leadership role. People studied the task and moved ahead, listening to one another, to be able to offer thoughts and ideas. Initially, most of the groups discussed a process or procedure to follow. Everyone had a chance to state his or her views, with folks adding constructive comments. For the most part, suggestions were simply accepted as presented.

As the need for actions became clear, most groups incorporated problem-solving steps. Around the tables, participants started to identify a number of solutions to address the budget shortfall. Some of those solutions included the following:

1. **Adjust** the work shifts of the police department in order to create a better schedule at the same or lesser cost.
2. **Shift** some of the responsibility from the local police to the state police.

3. **Reduce** the cost of road construction by using gravel, not asphalt.

As time was running short, there was one group that resolved the decisionmaking dilemma by suggesting the best solution was:

4. **Put** the decision on the ballot and give citizens the responsibility to decide.

The discussion in several groups clearly indicated that the Budget Committee did not want to make the difficult decisions.

OTTO DOERING: *The time that should be allotted to such exercises is a function of how quickly the groups can come together, enter their roles seriously and begin to think creatively. At the conference, some of the groups got 90 percent of the benefit from the exercise in a shortened time schedule; others did not. Scheduling is always a judgment call. In this case, I think that high value was achieved, even with the limited time.*

The willingness to be a serious role player is critical to success. Some of the committee members in Providence made name tags indicating the local interest group or individual they were representing. Anything that can be done to encourage more complete role playing should help.

At the conference, most groups entered into the spirit of the simulation and took their parts seriously. The "generational transfer" among the policy educators has been such that a number of the participants at this year's conference had never personally been through something like this.

In this case, the name of the game was "tradeoffs." Policy educators tend to be outsiders, looking in. We need to be reminded constantly of the direct impact of tradeoffs on citizens in a community. For them, it is not an abstract event. This simulation reminds us of the real-guts nature of the decisions that others are making for themselves and should make us a little more humble about our interjections into the process.

■ **The Use of Simulation in Public Issues Education**

LOIS FREY: *While this exercise isn't truly representative of civic discourse around a controversial issue, Extension educators can take away several valuable lessons. The nature of the alternative solutions given shows that in any group of individuals there will be a variety of responses to any task or issue. It also is observable that, depending on a variety of circumstances, group members bring different roles and behaviors to the group.*

OTTO DOERING: *Similar simulations have been used as a public policy education tool in the past. When it was possible to have all-day educational meetings that would attract citizens and leaders in a community, policy educators often*

would provide some factual information on an issue and then divide the audience into groups in order to determine their own choice of alternative solutions.

It proved to be marvelous training for citizens on a variety of issues—some that were not controversial and some that were. The experience with less controversial issues led to comfort with this process, even for controversial issues when they arose.

The experience with this tool was a very positive one. It is a tool that still is valid for work with citizens on critical issues.

What we find, however, is that we cannot take citizens through this as an educational experience. Citizens do not have the time, except when they are actually dealing with a pressing policy issue.

If policy educators are thinking of using this technique, they need to go through it themselves. Even if a policy educator does not intend to do something like this, he or she needs to be aware of the characteristics of this method for getting citizens to work through an issue.

I believe that this has real value as a simulation tool for Extension staff/faculty. It might be especially valuable for field staff/faculty. This exercise does not train individuals to become policy educators. What it does for university and field staff/faculty is sensitize them to the basics of the local decisionmaking process, as well as provide a potential tool to use with citizens involved in a real issue.

Uses of the Thyss Town Simulation

The use of simulations is a respected adult education methodology. The “Thyss Town Simulation” can be used for a one-session workshop specifically related to local budgets and scheduled to allow time for content and process debriefing. It also can be used as an initial exercise before addressing a different *real* issue in order to introduce elements that might surface when seeking to resolve community issues. Or, it can be used as a tool to develop group problem-solving skills by providing opportunity for increased observations and a summary “process” discussion.

The use of simulations is recognized in training and staff development. Participating as a group member provides opportunities for exposure to the pressures and positions within community decisionmaking. Participating in a simulation as staff development also provides opportunities for viewing an issue as an “insider.” To be other than the visiting resource or facilitator is a valuable lesson for an adult educator. The participant role can increase insights about the development of resource information and the group methods designed for a public issues education program.

**Forces That Shape
Our National Values:
Implications
for Policy Education**

