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How to Help Groups Develop an Understanding of Controversial Issues

By Malcolm S. Knowles

SETTING AND METHOD

Mr. Knowles explained that less is known technically about educating adults in public affairs than about any other aspect of adult education. He said he would, therefore, feel more comfortable in the role of consultant to the group, helping them to think through the problem, than in the role of an expert with the answers.

Mr. Knowles then employed the following procedure for carrying on a "group" consultation:

1. The audience was deployed into five subgroups, arranged in circles in the hall.
2. Each subgroup selected a spokesman to represent it on a "consultation panel."
3. Each subgroup briefed its spokesman for about ten minutes on each of the following questions raised by Mr. Knowles:
 - a. What groups that you work with is it most important to educate in understanding controversial issues, in priority order?
 - b. What are the controversial issues that are important for them to understand?
 - c. What are the problems and obstacles you encounter in trying to develop an understanding of controversial issues?
4. The five spokesmen took their place on a "consultation panel" and were interviewed by Mr. Knowles.

PRIORITY TARGET GROUPS

The panel agreed that the ultimate target was the general public, since by its votes and pressures it ultimately determines public policy. Some educational work can be done with the public directly, through mass media. But real understanding can be developed best through face-to-face educational activities. The channels to the public for this are the following target groups:

1. Professional educational workers, such as the agricultural extension staffs.

2. Farm organizations, such as the Farm Bureau, the Farmers Union, and the Grange.

3. Other civic and fraternal organizations, such as the Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, women's clubs, etc.

4. Educational activities under institutional auspices, such as evening high schools, university extension centers, churches, etc.

IMPORTANT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The following controversial issues that are important for groups to understand were identified:

National fiscal policy

Price program

Foreign trade

Public school aims and organization

Labor-management relations

International relations

Conservation

Urbanization

Civil liberties

National defense

Automation

It was agreed that any issue might be controversial for one of two reasons:

1. Real difference in interest or values among different population groupings.

2. Difference in information and understanding about the issues.

Education's role is to clarify the first and eliminate the second.

CHIEF PROBLEMS AND OBSTACLES

The following problems and obstacles in developing an understanding of controversial issues were identified:

1. Lack of time given to education in meetings of groups organized for other than educational purposes.
2. Apathy and lack of motivation to study seriously.
3. Conflict between short-term and long-term objectives in groups.
4. Feeling of hopelessness about being able to solve national problems.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

In the general discussion by the audience and Mr. Knowles which followed the "panel consultation," the following suggestions were made for dealing with the problem:

1. It is important to identify the individuals and groups that exert the greatest influence on the general public and to focus our educational efforts on them. Techniques for identifying these people are being developed by social scientists.³

2. It is necessary to distinguish the several different kinds of educational changes in people required to produce responsible action on controversial issues. At least the following types of changes are involved, with different educational methods being most effective for each:

Type of Change	Effective Methods
Knowledge	Lectures, written materials, visual aids, discussion
Understanding	Discussion, demonstration, problem-solving
Attitudes	Successful experience with new attitudes
Skills	Demonstration, practice
Interests	Attaching a new interest to a present interest, exposure
Values	Influence of respected leaders, discussion, experience with consequences

The educator does not actually produce these changes, but merely

³See Charles Loomis *et al.*, *Adult Education and Rural Social Systems*; Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure*; Richard Poston, *Democracy Is You*.

creates the environment and experiences in which self-change can take place. This is most likely to occur:

- a. When the participants have an active role in the process.
- b. When learning starts with the participants' own experiences — “where they are”
- c. When learning is based on situations that are real and that people care about — “controversial” issues provide an excellent setting for real learning.

3. Important as is the development of an understanding of the substance of controversial issues, probably even more important is the development of an understanding of a problem-solving *process* for dealing with them. Thus, an educational program should seek to develop skill in:

- a. Defining a problem.
- b. Analyzing causes.
- c. Obtaining data.
- d. Examining *all* alternative solutions.
- e. Choosing and putting into effect the best solution.
- f. Evaluating results and replanning.