Making Current Events Youth Relevant

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Abstract

This paper presents a strategy for making current events relevant to youthful learners

using structured learning experiences, data gather methods and a set of guidelines for the

educator. It provides a method by which students can take ownership of their learning

through identifying and dealing with issues which impact their lives. The theories of

public issues education and critical thinking methodology are used to develop a plan for

to teach youth to think about critical issues and problems beyond their immediate first

reaction. America's youth can learn to think critically and unemotionally before they act

on the complex issues in their lives that affect families, youth and communities in

America. Recommendations are given for the role of the educator.

Key Words: Public issues education, experiential learning, critical thinking, youth

relevant education, current events education, youth centered education

Introduction

When current events in our communities cause controversy or concern among friends and neighbors, there may be an opportunity for educators to use the situation as a "teachable moment." Controversial, complex and occasionally inflammatory topics can be used to teach critical thinking skills as delineated and described by Paul and Elder (2001) and to broaden the perspective of youthful learners. This paper presents a strategy for making current events relevant to youth using learner participation, focused inquiry and a designated role for the facilitator. Making current events youth relevant draws from the literature on public issues and policy education sponsored by the National Public Policy Education Committee of the Farm Foundation which has promoted issues and policy education for many years. Selected elements of various policy education models (Hahn, 1988), (Gratto, 1973), (Flinchbaugh, 1988) and (Young, 1988) are used in the development of this paper.

Emphasis is given to strategies and methods that promote discussion, discovery, and dialogue among participants and affected parties about the nature of the issue, the complexities involved and consequences of the chosen options. The appropriate role of the educator as described by Young (1988) is critical to using controversial issues successfully as a means of expanding the cognitive horizons of youth and forcing them to think critically about issues that affect their lives. The steps are listed below and each is explained in detail. Elements of Paul and Elder's (2001) critical thinking concepts are included as a process to enable youth to think broadly and to go beyond their current

knowledge base and value orientation. This is especially important for youth who may not have been exposed to a method of understanding complex and controversial issues.

Deciding to use Current Events in an Educational Activity

What does youth relevant mean? What are current events? Which current event is appropriate for an educational activity for youth? There are no universal guidelines for determining the appropriateness of an issue for a youth audience. The cultural milieu will help to determine which issues are appropriate. Youth relevant events include those that are current or pending and which will affect the life, well-being and attitude of the youthful learner. Examples are social, economic or environmental issues that have known consequences or effects (Morrow, 1985).

To help you make the appropriate decision about current events for an educational activity, consult with other educators or parents who may provide a perspective. When dealing with controversial issues in an educational setting, identify an advisory group to help choose the right issues for a good learning experience or to help frame the issue in terms of relevance to the learners. In working with public affairs or policy education in youth or adult settings, "an objective and neutral position [by the facilitator] is needed to deal with controversy and at the same time move the program through various stages of progress" (Bolton, 1991, p. 2).

Youthful learners can be recruited in a number of ways including 4-H Club members, community youth organizations with specific program interests such as Boy Scouts, and school events that are relevant to an issue or topic such as a social studies or civics project. The participants will bring different expectations based on their background and interests. These differences will make the process more challenging and interesting. It will provide a variety of perspectives that may not lead to consensus but will enrich the learning experience of the participants. It will be necessary to market the program based on potential learners' interests especially if diversity among the participants is a goal.

Defining the Issue

The issue evolution and intervention model developed by Gratto (1973) has been the foundation for understanding how issues emerge and public policy education is conducted. In House's (1988) interpretation of the Gratto model, issues emerge when there is a concern, when more people become involved and the communication grows. The issue is formulated based on the public's perceptions of alternate solutions and consequences. At this point, people begin to take a side and to make a choice.

The Family Community Leadership (401) series defines an issue as "a topic of public concern which can be acted on and is a subject of fairly widespread public interest" (Regional FCL, 1985, p. 2). In dealing with issues, a problem arises when people make decisions based on limited knowledge, insufficient data or the opinions of others they see as knowledgeable. This leads to oversimplifying the issue.

When identifying the issue, the context and the youth group should be considered.

1. Is the issue defined in more than one way?

2. Are differences due to differences in race or ethnic background?

3. Is this an emotional issue?

4. Will this issue be long lasting or is it of relatively short duration? (Morrow, 1985).

The strategy presented here deals with public issues in the context of facilitating a learning experience; these should be stated so that the issue is accepted as a true statement or a commonly held belief. For example, "Polar bears are dying because of global warming." Another example might be, "Automobile emissions contribute to global warming." Use the questions above to determine if the learners accept the statement as an issue of concern to the public and not just private issue which affects only those persons or groups directly involved (Morrow, 1985).

Gathering Information about the Issue

For an informed discussion to take place it is necessary to collect information about the issue beyond what is commonly known or believed. This process is most meaningful when the learners are involved. Data from a variety of sources should be examined to get a perspective of the various positions that are being discussed. Local, regional and national publications are always a good source for a brief overview of current

happenings. For example, editorial pages of newspapers may be an excellent source of opinions that provide a variety of perspectives. Young people will likely use the internet and various web sites to gather information. Books with a more detailed background of the issue may also be useful. It is especially important to provide enough sources of information that there is a chronology of events rather than just one article, one blog, or the latest editorial page opinion. Another valuable source of information is to talk to people in the community. This is an opportunity for the participants to survey opinions of people whose views they respect.

Another data-gathering technique is to conduct a survey. This will require preparing a short survey instrument. If the learners are involved in developing the survey it is more interesting and beneficial. Care should be taken to assure the questions are used to elicit opinions without biasing the response. Whatever method or methods are used, after the data is gathered, each learner or group of learners should prepare a brief summary report of their findings. While a formal report is not needed, it should be in a written format with the information documents and the survey results attached. This is used to help the participants focus their thoughts and prepare their findings for use in the next phase of the current events discussion. It should be noted that collecting primary data on an issue is much more complicated than what is presented here and if the survey is connected with a college or university there may be concerns with the use of human subjects and approval from University Review Boards.

Preparing for the Learning Environment

Environments can be conducive or detrimental to learning. Attention to this step will insure that all the necessary elements are present that will make the physical and the psychological environment a positive part of the learning experience. Suggestions for making a comfortable setting and an inviting place to learn about controversial issues are given in Regional FCL 401, (1985).

The psychological environment is the responsibility of the educator or facilitator. It is important to establish and maintain a positive atmosphere where the students are comfortable and able to express themselves freely without repercussion or disapproval. In preparing the learning environment consider the following:

1. Review the purpose of the activity.
2. Restate the issue as defined by the group as part of step one.
3. Review some of the data gathering steps that might be taken.
4. Talk briefly about the importance of a good learning environment.
5. Tell students:
   a) That they must keep an open mind for the exercise and participate fully if they are to understand the issues.
   b) To avoid taking a position or making a choice based on what they have heard.

c) That during the discussion their views will be respected and they are not required to agree or disagree on any particular issue.

d) That the educator will remain neutral at all times. (FCL, 401, 1985)

Discussing the Issue from Various Perspectives

Prepare questions that will cognitively engage the learners. The discussion format will depend on the number of students involved. If the group is six or less, strive for individual representation. If it is larger than six, consider a team approach. Each individual/group will use the summarized data and prepare a response to the issue using the questions below as a guide to critical thinking and rational action. Help to participants to answer the following questions modified from the critical thinking guide by Paul and Elder (2001).

Purpose: What is my goal or purpose?

Information: What information am I using in coming to that conclusion?

Conclusions: How did I reach this conclusion?

                    Is there another way to interpret the information?

Concepts: What are the main ideas here?

Assumptions: What am I assuming?

Implications: If someone accepted my position, what would be the implications?

Points of View: From what point of view am I looking at this issue?

Questions: What questions am I raising? (Paul and Elder, 2001)

These elements will guide the process of thinking about the issue and the subsequent discussion. Using these elements will enable each participant to formulate a rational position rather than an emotional one. The purpose of this step is to develop skills that can be used to analyze information and to become accustomed to using the process in everyday events and activities. The goal of making current events relevant to youthful learners is to prepare them to think critically about issues that affect them as well as the public.

The Role of the Educator

The educator is important at every stage in the learning event and especially during the discussion. These roles may vary but during the discussion the educator should provide unbiased facts and keep the discussion on an equal footing. The literature on public issues education provides insight in the variety of roles an educator might utilize. Young (1988) lists five distinct educator roles: (a) The forecaster who knows in advance which issues will emerge as important to the public, (b) the advisor who assists the individual or group in sifting the facts, (c) the facilitator who utilizes appropriate group processes to keep the discussion on an equal footing and encourages creative ideas for the group, (d) the information provider who gives unbiased facts and assistance in finding information relevant to the issue, and (e) the program developer who helps the group reach the educational goal of the discussion. The program developer must put the entire exercise in the context of an educational event and keep it from becoming a dividing issue among the members of the group.

In this paper, the educator will assume different roles with a primary emphasis on the role of program developer of the learning event and the facilitator during the discussion. The role of the educator as an unbiased facilitator focused on a program to enable youth to examine controversial issues in an unbiased way cannot be overemphasized. House (1988) suggests the educator should:

1. Listen actively and pose questions that help to explain or clarify.
2. Facilitate communication between individuals or groups.
3. Help students to know and understand the consequences of their position.
4. Avoid the urge to tell students how to think or what to do

These strategies reinforce the concept of an unbiased and neutral leader in charge of the learning activity.

Evaluating the Learning Activity

Evaluating the learning activity will provide insight for later use with other issues that merit youth centered education and involvement. The evaluation can be as formal or informal as the situation demands. A two stage approach is recommended for issues education; an after activity reaction to see what the participants thought they learned and a three month follow up to determine the long term learning outcomes.

The following questions are derived from the elements of though in critical thinking as described by Elder and Paul (2001). These questions will determine if critical thinking has been improved. Use the same set of questions three months after the initial activity. The evaluation questions can also be used as a discussion activity.

1. Did you learn what an issue is?

2. Do you think there is more than one way to interpret an issue?

3. Were you able to select the main ideas in the discussion and presentation of the issue?

4. Did you use additional information in making your decision about the issue?

5. Did you reach your conclusion after a careful thought process?

6. Did you make certain assumptions about the issue and were those assumptions changed or challenged during the activity?

7. If someone accepted your position on this particular issue, would the implications be clear?

8. Are you looking at the issue from a particular point of view?

9. Can you look at controversial issues somewhat differently than you could before the exercise?

Preparing for the End to the Activity

It is important to plan an ending for the process that prepares youth to examine a current or controversial issue. Give a balanced presentation that does not show how you

personally feel about the issue at the center of the learning event. Suggest to the students that this process can be used in many different situations and that critical thinking about current events is a skill that continues through out the life span.

Recommendations

If our youth are to be prepared for their many roles in society it is important that they be prepared to think in a rationale way that will guide their behavior. The process presented here can be used in a variety of contexts. The steps are adapted from the public issues education and critical thinking theory and practice. These can be used by 4-H Clubs, Girl Scouts or any group of young people to prepare them to think critically and to handle controversial issues.

Are there any current events that are not relevant to youth? Probably not, but whether the issue is selected by the educator or the participants, it should be chosen very carefully. Issues which best meet this criteria might include global warming, legal and illegal immigration, health care for all citizens, a national identification card for all citizens, renewal energy sources and many other current events.

Public education is under attack by parents, teachers, school administrators and policy makers. One of the criticisms is that students do not learn how to think but rather take for granted the teacher's view on everything, which may have a political or social bias that does not agree with the values of the parents. By knowing how to identify and define an

issue and examine it in a rational way, the student can form his/her own opinions regardless of the source of information. The steps presented here can be used in public school settings or other contexts such as community clubs.

Education is a complex process with many diverse learning environments that involve youth. Many of these offer an opportunity to develop a skill that can be used throughout one's life and in every setting. Learning to think and act critically and to examine an issue or event in a rationale way is a competency that is greatly needed. Educators have a major role in this developing this skill among our youth. It is important to recognize and prepare for it.

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