Collaborative Learning: An Approach for Designing Community Discussions

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This session has three objectives:
- Provide an introduction to Collaborative Learning
- Compare Collaborative Learning to Public Issues Education (PIE)
- Illustrate how systems thinking can help people work through complex situations.

Collaborative Learning is a technique that has been developed in the Pacific Northwest over the past decade. The approach is specifically designed to deal with situations that are simultaneously *complex* and *controversial*. The complexity of the situation is addressed through activities that are informed by systems thinking and adult learning theories. The propensity for controversy is mitigated by applying various insights and techniques that emerge from the field of public policy mediation (primarily environmental) and negotiation. Most Collaborative Learning applications to date have addressed natural resource decisions, ranging across coastal management, National Forest planning, and forest fire recovery. In recent years, both the geographic and topical range of Collaborative Learning projects has expanded to include efforts as varied as access to health insurance (Wisconsin) and dairy nutrient management (Sweden).

While Collaborative Learning has a number of features that distinguish it from other public policy conflict management techniques, the most useful focal point for an Extension/Public Issues Education audience is the emphasis on ***active learning.*** Collaborative Learning is predicated on the belief that there is a significant set of public policy issues where the complexity of the situation takes us right tothe edge of our collective knowledge. In such situations, the most credible means of achieving a meaningful improvement is to design methods of public inquiry that are rich in learning and encourage innovation and experiential enquiry.

The body of experience with Collaborative Learning and with Public Issues Education inform each other in many ways. No doubt the most obvious is the profound need for venues wherein people can work through the complex issues of the day, and wrestle with diverging options and groups whose values and goals differ from their own. The two approaches can be compared as follows:
- Both emphasize learning
- Both have university roots
- CL is more grounded in mediation
- PIE is more interested in the broad populace
- PIE is more expert-centered
- CL is more active learning-centered
- PIE is more routinized
        (i.e., the Kettering Method

People from North America who have studied the Collaborative Learning approach in depth seem to find the systems thinking component to be the most intriguing or novel. The Europeans who have spent time with the method tend to dwell more on the benefits of the conflict management techniques. This divergence may have arisen because the soft systems literature that Collaborative Learning draws upon is far more developed in Europe (Checkland, Röling, the Open University group, etc), while the public deliberation/ environmental conflict literature has arisen primarily in the states (Bingham, Yankelovich, Reich, the Harvard Negotiation Project, etc.).

Collaborative Learning relies on systems theories at two different levels. First, it employs the soft systems work of Peter Checkland to inform the overall sequence of activities and the need to develop a process that can accommodate multiple worldviews of what constitutes a "problem" and what would be an "improvement." Second, it uses a number of specific systems thinking activities as discrete learning opportunities that have been shown to enhance the breadth of people's thinking about the situation. These have successfully moved people beyond single-issue agendas; they still care passionately about the issue that motivated their involvement, but they now see that their issue is intertwined with those that other groups are equally committed to.

This session concludes with an activity organized around the videotape *Healing the Water*, which depicts the history of allocation, use, and controversy over the water resources of the Truckee river basin. This video reflects the level of complexity that characterizes many natural resource disputes, and leaves one with the feeling that any quick or easy answer is likely to be cause more problems than it solves. This video provides the basis for a learning and discussion activity that occupies the balance of the session.