Congress in the classroom

Janaki R.R. Alavalapati
Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation
Virginia Tech
&
J.G Collomb
School of Forest Resources and Conservation
University of Florida

Presented at the 8th Biennial Conference on University Education in Natural Resources
Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, March 25-27, 2010
Outline of the presentation

- Students’ perceptions about policy and administration
- Policy & administration education in resource conservation
  - Importance, challenges, and opportunities
- Congress in the classroom a “Policy Play” exercise
  - Objectives
  - Structure
  - Implementation
- Lessons learned
Students’ perceptions of policy & administration education

- Policy & administration is all politics
- Science and logic have no bearing on policy
- Policy makers are “selfish, morons, and idiots”
- Why don’t policy makers understand the basics of “xxx...yyyy...zzz”
- I am a “biologist” and my work has nothing to do with policy
- I am just one among the thousands and millions--so why bother? Positive or negative apathy!
- Other....
Policy & administration education in natural resource conservation

- Importance
  - Policies guide the behavior of stakeholders
  - Policies impact the economy, environment, and society
  - Policies impact current and future generations

- Challenges to the pedagogy
  - Policy is a multidisciplinary field
  - Policy is a public good
  - Policy is less amenable for lab/field exercises

- Opportunities to the pedagogy
  - Make use of students disciplinary expertise
  - Make use of students energy, creativity, and ideas
  - Make use of contemporary issues, topics & actions
"Citizens should not watch the making of sausage or public policy" (Moore and Corey)
Objectives

- to understand and appreciate the complexity of policy process
- To take a role in the process and experience the frustration/fun
- to comprehend the dynamics of diverse stakeholders
- to improve policy analysis and communication skills
- to apply multidisciplinary concepts and theories to policy development
Congress in the classroom

A policy play exercise

Structure

- Requires two 50-90 minutes class periods
- Every student plays one of the following roles
  - An elected policy-maker (congress-person, senator)
  - A governmental agency representative (e.g. USFS)
  - A scientific expert (e.g. economist)
  - An interest group representative
  - A journalist
  - President of the USA

- Performance: 3 minute oral presentation + 1 page write-up
- Discuss and vote on relevant policy issue
  - Reviewed ahead of time from www.gpoaccess.gov/bills/
Congress in the classroom

A policy play exercise

- Implementation
  - 2-3 weeks before:
    - Assign a policy: For example HR 3420 “National Forest Protection and Restoration Act”. Access the bill at http://www.gpoaccess.gov/bills/browse.html
    - Explain and assign roles, randomly or incorporating student preferences. Takes 20-30 minutes.
    - Select a speaker of the house and a senate leader
    - Ask students to specify their role to avoid duplication and give them a constituency from which to develop their position
      - E.g. D-CA, R-FL, F&WS, USFS, WWF, AFPA, TNC, etc…
Congress in the classroom

A policy play exercise

- 51 Roles (the number can vary):
  - President of the U.S. (1)
  - Members of Congress:
    - Speaker & House of Representatives (9)
    - Senate leader & Senators (9)
  - Interest groups:
    - Representatives of supporting groups (8)
    - Representatives of opposing groups (8)
  - Government agencies:
    - Representatives of USDA FS (2); USFWS (2); USNPS (2)
  - Scientists:
    - Sociologists (2); Ecologists (2); and Economists (2)
  - Media reporters: (4)
Congress in the classroom

*A policy play exercise*

- **Act I: The House**
  - Journalist (1) provides background, overview, upcoming process of the bill (through reporting & interviews)
  - House convenes: Speaker asks representatives of interest groups (8), scientists (3), and government agencies (3) to present their details about the bill; Speaker can allow X minutes for questions from house members
  - Each member & the speaker of the House (9) presents his/her view
  - Each member & the speaker votes YES or NO to the bill
  - Speaker will send the bill, if passed, to the Senate. If the bill gets killed in the House, it will be introduced in the Senate as a fresh bill
  - Journalist (1) provides a summary of what happened (through reporting & interviews)
Act II: The Senate & the President

- Journalist (1) provides background, overview, upcoming process of the bill (through reporting & interviews)
- Senate convenes: Senate leader asks representatives of interest groups (8), scientists (3), and government agencies (3) present their details about the bill; Senate leader can allow X minutes for questions from senate members
- Each member of the Senate (9) provides his/her view of the bill
- Each member of the Senate votes YES or NO to the bill
- Senate leader will send the bill, if passed, to the President for “adoption”
- President will address the nation before signing or veto the bill. Even if the bill is killed either in the House or Senate, President will still address the nation about the issue.
- Journalist (1) interviews selected policy participants about the future course of this policy issue.
Adapting to your needs and objectives

- Number of students can vary
- Single session or double session
- Ask students to
  - To prepare at least one question to ask during the play
  - Pair with assignment to watch CSPAN
  - Ask to attend a local policy meeting
- Invite outsiders to watch the play
- Make it a semester long project to enable students to develop more knowledge about the bill’s issues and stakeholders.
Congress in the classroom

Lessons learned

- Very educational, engaging, and fun exercise
- Good exposure to congressional websites and current bills
- Opportunity to appreciate the challenges of:
  - Aggregating diverse constituents’ preferences
  - Dealing with incomplete/redundant information
  - Handling personal motivations
- Students would comprehend why
  - Policy process is messy
  - Policy process is complex
  - Policy process can be boring
  - Pork barrel projects are common
  - Wheeling and dealings are common in policy process