



**Keynote for Second Consumer Citizenship Network (CCN) International Conference
May 26-27, 2005 University of Economics, Bratislava, Slovakia**

Sue L.T. McGregor PhD
Faculty of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University, Nova Scotia, Canada
sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca
[Http://www.consultmcgregor.com](http://www.consultmcgregor.com)

**The Dynamics of Shared Responsibility:
Strategies and Initiatives for Participatory Consumerism**

The crux of this paper is that responsibility for the *conscience of the marketplace* is shared among consumers, governments and industries and that this sharing is a complex dynamic. In order for consumers to participate responsibly, with a moral conscience, in a consumer society, they have to know that they are being held accountable. They have to know what participatory consumerism would look like and what is expected of them when they are asked to be accountable in the marketplace. To facilitate citizens acquiring this mind set, this paper discusses the nature of participatory consumerism, followed by four suggestions for how educators and others can augment their work so it is grounded in a new taxonomy of consumer education types, leading to a concern for moral development (a principled conscience), transformative learning, and transdisciplinary inquiry.

Issues with Accountability

Accountability measures are needed wherever there are concentrations of power in society (Democracy Watch, 2002). In most developed countries, consumers spend more than two thirds of the GDP relative to business and government (70% in Canada and the US). This is phenomenal collective power, implying that accountability measures should be in place. The challenge to individuals seeing themselves with this sort of power is that, in an individualistic society, where self-interest is the norm, there is a general inability to make judgements beyond one's personal experience and accept collective responsibility in the face of the damaging effects of consumerism (BBC/h2g2, 2001).

It is not enough to promote the idea of corporate ecological responsibility, and to hold governments and nations accountable for the idea of global ecological responsibility (Evans, 2000). Consumers, themselves, also need to be held accountable for their actions and their impact on the environment, human rights, labour conditions, social injustices and inequalities. This paper is asking that consumers become self-enforcers at the same time that they depend on governments and industries for their respective responsible behaviour. To do this, they need our help, especially given the current cultural trend of denying direct human responsibility in all areas of life. People are conditioned to "give their power away" to external agencies, including governments, corporations, religions, teachers, doctors, lawyers and judges (Webb, 2001). We need to help them get this power back.

Nature of Participatory Consumerism

Gabriel and Lang (1995) recognize that the concept of consumerism means different things to different people in different contexts. But, they felt it was possible to identify at least five different approaches. They propose that (a) consumerism is the essence of the good life and a vehicle for freedom, power and happiness. Consumers have the ability to choose and enjoy material objects and experiences (services). (b) Consumerism supplements work, religion and politics as the main mechanism by which social status and distinction are achieved. Displays of all of the goods accumulated gains prestige and envy - the ideology of conspicuous consumption. (c) Consumerism is also seen as the pursuit of ever higher standards of living, thereby justifying global development and capitalism via trade and internationalism of the marketplace. (d) Consumerism is a social movement seeking to protect the consumer against excesses of business and to promote the rights of consumers (concerns for value for money and quality of goods and services). Finally, (e) consumerism is coming to be seen as a political gambit to gain power. States (governments) are moving away from the paternalistic mode of service provider and protector of citizens to privatization of services that can be bought in the private market from corporations.

In 2001, I developed another concept of consumerism, participatory consumerism. I drew on insights gained from the people-centered development, participatory citizenship and action research literature (McGregor, 2001). I shared this idea at the 2002 international conference on developing consumer citizenship in Hamar, Norway (McGregor, 2002). Today, I will provide a summary of the four key concepts shaping the idea of participatory consumerism followed by some ideas for how we can start to make this a reality.

Libratory Participation

People who are oppressed are exploited and taken advantage of due to their circumstances. They feel they cannot flee from, or change, what appears to be, irreversible conditions. In a consumer culture, not only are labourers oppressed. In the North, people are so indoctrinated into the logic of the market that they cannot 'see' anything wrong with what they are doing. Because they do not critically challenge the market ideology and the myth of consumerism, they actually contribute to their *own oppression* (slaves of the market) and the oppression of others who make the goods and services and the oppression of the ecosystem (McGregor, 2001, 2002). Liberation results from an interesting process. As consumers, with the help of educators, learn to see marketplace challenges interrelated to other problems and issues within a total complex, their social conscience can begin to emerge. There is more potential for them to engage in thought and actions that critique the status quo power distributions in society. People who are liberated see themselves as limited but challenged rather than fated to oppression ("Libratory Pedagogy," 2005). Liberated people would be the essence of participatory consumerism. Liberation is life affirming and humanizing, the opposite of regular consumerism.

Transformational Participation

Transformational participation entails participation in such a way that sustainable results will continue when the initiative is completed. Transformational participatory consumerism would involve an evolution wherein people would see themselves as world citizens first, and consumers second. Central to this transformation is dialogue. Participatory citizenship involves discussion among people about public issues shaped by listening, talking and acting such that the world changes for the better. Applied to consumerism, similar public discourse would involve

the implications of current consumption behaviour on the lives of others, future generations and the integrity of the ecosystem.

Reflective Participation

Participatory consumerism would involve active reflection prior to, during and after purchase decisions. Reflective participation entails dealing with uncertainty while knowing that choices have to be made and action has to be taken (this action could be a decision not to purchase). Moral issues have to be dealt with. These refer to disagreements people may have about values that justify personal consumption actions. Reflection allows people to step back from the immediacy of a situation and examine their beliefs, attitudes and past behaviours in a dispassionate manner. This detached reflection flies in the face of the need for instant gratification and material accumulation, features of the prevailing consumer society. Nonetheless, participatory consumerism would involve the dynamic process of action-reflection-revised action.

Critical and Skeptical Participation

Ongoing, active participation in consumption would help people to be ever curious, to take risks in their decision climate of uncertainty, to gain a better understanding of complicated realities comprising the global marketplace, and to gain enough power to work for improvement in their consuming role, and by association, the well-being of global citizens. Indeed, one can be a consumer while disagreeing and criticizing the marketplace in their role as citizen. Being skeptical means being cautious when drawing conclusions about the world and willing to change one's minds if new information appears (Alberta Skeptics, 2005). Also, as a caveat, being skeptical is not the same thing as being cynical. Skeptics do not assume that the world is bad, evil or corrupt. They do believe that there is power, and that there are hidden agendas in every message and every position that people take on issues. Skeptics will critically examine whether the knowledge and perceptions they encounter are actually true, whether they have good reasons for believing something. This would be truly participatory consumerism.

Strategies for Consumer Citizenship Educators

Perceiving citizens as “participating” consumers is a powerful way to extend the current dialogue around consumer citizenship. Participatory means a state of being related to a larger whole by taking part, sharing and contributing. An increased sensitivity to one's connectedness to others in the world's marketplace could be referred to as conscientization. This means that people gain a conscience through the process of learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, develop a critical awareness, so that they can take action against the oppressive elements of reality. This personal growth involves becoming more fully human, not just a more efficient consumer. The final section of this paper will tease out four strategies being used in other educational settings and discuss why they are deemed relevant to consumer citizenship education.

Typology of Consumer Education Approaches

Exciting new work is being done around the relationship between the way consumer education is taught and the kind of consumer that is formed (Flowers, et al., 2001; Sandlin, 2004). They offer a typology of three types of consumer education and three resultant types of consumers. Type 1 consumer education teaches people about consumer information, protection and advocacy leading to consumer who see consuming as their key role in the economy. They equate success with materialism and money and think consuming is a good and natural thing.

Type 2 consumer education teaches people about the importance of critiquing the role of consumption in their life but the intent is to form consumers who focus on changing their life style to accommodate for the environmental implications of their consuming decisions. Type 3 consumer education teaches people to be critical citizens in their consumer role. The consumers' main focus is to free themselves from the grasp of the market. But, their concern is not totally extended to the plight of others yet, because have not found their inner voice as a moral citizen.

I added a fourth type of consumer education to this typology, the empowerment approach for mutual interest. From this perspective, consumer educators would teach people using critical pedagogy, intending for them to learn how to unveil oppressive power relationships in the global market. Critical reflection helps people find their inner power, their inner voice and the potential to change the world for the better, by challenging the status quo from a social justice and moral imperative stance. They know that they have a responsibility to help other consumer-citizens to find their voice too, because, once found, the person will be transformed and will not consume the same way (McGregor, in press). They will have evolved towards having a moral conscience in the marketplace.

Moral Development

Indeed, educators who are striving to prepare participatory consumer citizens need to appreciate the different levels of moral development. They would ask themselves, "*Why don't people, in their consumer role, have a well developed moral conscience?*" Tucker (1994) sheds very interesting light on the concept of moral consciousness. He explains that "when we can see into the complexity of a situation, look with penetrating insight into all of the possibilities, understand the true impact of each possible action, then we are using moral consciousness" (p.1). He has just described a heightened awareness wherein people choose consciously rather than instinctively or habitually. Hand-in-hand with moral consciousness is a sense of connectedness, an awareness that everyone and everything is linked together and that one has to continuously rise above a sense of personal self. Moral consciousness refers to the power of choice. People can chose to reject responding automatically to a situation and elect to be acutely aware of the mix of right and wrong, of good and bad in everything, and of the many possible responses to a situation. Being conscious of the moral quality of one's consumption choices is an important part of one's life that, and once gained, can never be lost.

The most popular theory of how people develop morally is Kohlberg's (1981) work. He proposes that people move, sequentially, through three stages (with two levels at each stage) on the path to a principled conscience. At Level one, people do things because they are told to and because they do not want the consequences or punishment if they do not obey. They try to stay out of trouble and their motivation to act is anticipation of pleasure or pain. In level two, the individual does something because it is in their best interest. People are concerned with fair exchanges and will give if they know they are getting something back in return. They know they risk punishment but they make concessions only as necessary to satisfy their own needs. They will do what is necessary and value people in terms of how much they can help get what they want.

In Level three, a person's orientation shifts from pleasing self to pleasing and helping others. But, the *intent* is to gain the approval of others (not altruistic). "Everyone else is doing it" is the new motto. Individual vengeance is not allowed but collective retribution for a wrong against the group is alright. Punishment is allowed if someone has strayed from the group norms.

What is *morally right* is anything that conforms to what is expected by one's peers or society. Good and right behaviour is that which maintains good interpersonal relationships (remember these are usually teenagers) and good inner feelings such as love, empathy, trust and friendship. This stage of moral development is intensely focused on two-person relationships, like friends or family members.

When someone reaches Level four, their perception of what is morally right shifts from what peer's expect to a new respect for formal rules, laws and authority - what is necessary to keep order in society. One's concern is now for society as a whole. This concern is evidenced by obeying the laws, demanding punishment for those who do not, justice for those who are harmed. These conventions keep society running and functioning smoothly. Authority figures are seldom questioned because they ensure consistency and set precedents that provide order.

At Level five, instead of blindly adhering to rules and laws specific to an orderly society, at this stage, people begin to question "what *is* a good society" and strive to figure out what society *should* look like so that the welfare of everyone is met. At this stage, people assume that individuals are born with rights and society should not be able to infringe on those rights. In fact, society should protect these rights. Each person benefits from a *social contract* - society will agree (contract) to protect the welfare of its individual citizens. Also, each individual can exercise these rights unless, in doing so, the person infringes on others' same rights. Any punishment for infringement of these rights must protect future victims, provide deterrents, and rehabilitate offenders.

Finally, at Level six, people will have developed a principled conscience. They will have forged a respect for all human beings, justice for all, freedom for all, basic dignity for all, empathy for all. They will follow their conscience, their internalized ideals, no matter what others may think. If they do not follow their conscience, live by their principles, they experience guilt and condemn themselves for not being true to their moral compass. Civil disobedience is alright because it is acceptable to disobey an unjust law. It is assumed that each and every person is due full consideration of their interests in every situation, and that those interests are just as important as anyone else's.

Of grave import to consumer citizenship educators is that 75% of the world will never develop a principled conscience or even the concept of a social contract. Instead, they will be stalled at Level four or lower (Kohlberg, 1981). They will obey the laws, demand punishment for those who do not, justice for those who are harmed and never question authority because questioning it would threaten social order. If stalled at a lower level, consumers would look out for their own self interest and use people to get what they want. They would not engage in altruistic behaviour nor would they move beyond group-think.

More telling is that Stage one applies to those aged 1-9, Stage two relates to those aged 10-20 and the advanced Stage three pertains to those aged 20 and over. This suggests that the adult consumer is behaving at the moral age of a 10 to 20 year old, or younger. This possibility does not bode well for participatory consumerism. Being stalled at a moral age, that is narrowly focused on peer and group acceptance, and a predisposition to not challenge authority, suggests that consumer citizenship educators are faced with a real challenge. The young students they teach may never advance beyond Level four and the majority of adult consumers are stalled at this moral stage. Somehow, educators have to find a way to break this moral imperative barrier and advance people to the principled conscience stage. Three ideas for how we might do this are

tendered below.

Transformative Learning

If a person's priorities or assumptions change, then the learning process becomes transformative. The person will now have the ability to critically reflect on their own and others' premises, things that are taken for granted without any proof. As a result of critically reflecting on underlying premises, one's specific beliefs about oneself or the world transform as does one's world view. A transformed learner is progressing toward being an autonomous, critically thinking individual who negotiates their own meaning instead of uncritically acting on those of others, or doing what has always been done. As a result, the learner is more self-aware, more conscious of conditions of society and more predisposed to continually search for new meanings, not just more facts and information (Barkmeier, 1999; Mezirow, 1991).

Transformation occurs when one has to deal with a disorienting dilemma; that is, an emotionally charged situation, a catalyst, that fails to fit one's expectations and makes one completely lose one's bearings and become lost. When someone experiences a transformative moment in their consumption life (like learning about the labour behind the label), the events have such a profound impact on them, and the *reflection* on the event is so meaningful, that the person's consuming behaviour changes entirely, and forever, as a result. The person now embraces a completely new way to interpret future consuming experiences. The person is more reflective and critical of the world, more open to perspectives of others and are less defensive and more accepting of new ideas.

To facilitate transformative learning, leading to transformative consumption, consumer citizenship educators could learn the process of reflective inquiry, using scaffolding. This approach to teaching assumes that a student can be in one of three mental spaces when it comes to problem solving or skill performance: (a) able to do it independently, (b) unable do it even with help, or (c) able to it with help. It is when a student is in the latter head-space that scaffolding works. The underlying foundation of the scaffolding model is five different types of *reflective inquiry* that a learners can engage in on a regular basis with the help of the teacher: creative, caring, critical, collaborative and collegial (the 5Cs) (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000).

Succinctly, and respectively, learning experiences would involve students working and learning collaboratively together to solve consumption related problems so gain different perspectives and an appreciation for how they come up with their interpretation of their consumption experiences. Educators would create caring learning environments where students can engage in critical, reflective dialogue and guided self-discovery. Educators would help students deeply question the status quo, looking for underlying power relationships and whose interest is really being served. They would focus on personal and social justice issues as they relate to consuming and producing. Educators would create a space where students are expected and encouraged to contemplate the ideal ethical and moral vision of consumption. When people contemplate, they acknowledge their humanity and connections to others and they slow down so they can meditate about their consuming practices. Finally, educators would pay close attention to helping students learn that, eventually, they have to embrace a moral position in the marketplace if they accept that a just marketplace would reflect tolerance, sensitivity, and ethical responsibility for one's actions. Educators would help students learn that they should strive for critically informed consumption if they want to convince others that they are accountable (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000).

Transdisciplinary Inquiry

Given the lack of moral imperative in consumers, and the prevalence of Type 1 and 2 consumer education, consumer citizenship educators face a complex situation as they strive to ensure that participatory consumerism evolves. I would like to suggest an exciting new approach to practice and inquiry that would have educators working with people from all walks of life - not just other educators (McGregor, 2004). This is called transdisciplinary inquiry and involves multiple disciplines, other elements of society, and **the space between them**, with the possibility of new perspectives beyond those disciplines and actors (Nicolescu, 1997).

When engaging in transdisciplinary inquiry (this means zigzagging or weaving back and forth), academics would work with academics *as well as* civil society organizations, actors, artists, musicians, dancers, government officials, youth, singers, poets, gardeners, journalists, businesses, story tellers, videographers and the like. Each of these minds have been prepared differently so they will *see* the world differently. The intent would be to weave knowledge together from these *many ways of knowing* that exist along side academia and the scientific method. Using a metaphor, they all would work together in the form of a dance, counting on new perspectives that will generate new information, insights, concepts and growing relationships. They would assume that a new type of knowledge is emerging from the dance, with complex and complicated insights. They would rely on *each other* to interpret this new knowledge as they work together to deal with large global issues including: human aggression, harmonious distribution of resources, development of anthropocentric (human centered) world views, and the realization of human empowerment and potential through education. The ultimate intent is to understand the world, not just bits and pieces of the world.

As people approach the group of co-learners in the dance, the other *knowledge dancers*, they would be willing to suspend their views of reality at that moment (cross the veil of resistance) and be open to the new insights that will emerge from working together as they weave their collective knowledge to form new knowledge and concepts. Information will literally be *in-formation* as they work together and watch their consciousness merge into one for the moment. People would learn to see things in open unity, more complexly, rather than in black and white. Also, constantly adapting relationships lie at the heart of what makes solving these complex problems so special. Any information brought to the dance by someone will be modified as it is passed from one person to another within these changing relationships - it is *in-formation*.

Transdisciplinarity is a new form of learning, inquiry and problem posing involving cooperation among *different parts of society*, including academia, in order to meet the complex challenges of society. Through mutual learning, the knowledge of all participants is enhanced and this new learning is used to collectively devise solutions to intricate societal problems that are interwoven (Regeer, 2002). Out of the dance and the dialogue, a new vision of reality is possible (Nègre, 1999). Conceiving our work as consumer citizenship educators through the lens of the transdisciplinary dance is a powerful way to move forward to accomplish participatory consumerism and more shared responsibility in the marketplace. This approach is true to the principle the dynamic nature of shared accountability in a consumer society.

Conclusion

The title of the talk is **The Dynamics of Shared Responsibility: Strategies and Initiatives for Participatory Consumerism**. To address this dynamic, I shared ideas about how

to see consumerism as participatory, how to teach consumer education differently and how to work with others differently as we write new curricula and pose problems related to consumer citizenship and global consumption. These ideas offer another perspective when dealing with the complexity of holding people responsible and accountable for their actions in their consumer role. When combined with other great ideas tendered at this conference, we move closer to creating a conscience in the marketplace and creating principled consumer citizens.

References

- Alberta Skeptics. (2005). *About skepticism*. Retrieved May 17, 2005 from http://abskeptic.htmlplanet.com/about_skepticism.htm
- Barkmeier, B.J. (1999). *Transformative learning*. Accessed August 3, 2000 at <http://www.usd.edu/~knorum/learningpapers/transform.html>
- BBC/h2g2. (2001). *The allure of consumerism*. Retrieved May 17, 2005 from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A654969>
- Democracy Watch. (2002). *About Democracy Watch*. Retrieved May 17, 2005 from <http://www.dwatch.ca/>
- Evans, T. (2000). *The campaign for individual ecological responsibility*. Retrieved May 17, 2005 from <http://www.druidry.org/obod/intro/eco.html>
- Flowers, R., Chodkiewicz, A., Yasukawa, K., McEwen, C., Ng, D., Stanton, N., & Johnston, B. (2001, December). *What is effective education: A literature review*. Sydney: Australian Securities and Investments Commission. Retrieved January 25, 2005 from [http://www.fido.asic.gov.au/asic/pdf/lib.nsf/LookupByFileName/EffectConEd_report.pdf/\\$file/EffectConEd_report.pdf](http://www.fido.asic.gov.au/asic/pdf/lib.nsf/LookupByFileName/EffectConEd_report.pdf/$file/EffectConEd_report.pdf)
- Gabriel, Y., & Lang, T. (1995). *The unmanageable consumer*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Henderson, J.G., & Hawthorne, R.D. (2000). *Transformative curriculum leadership* (2nd ed.). NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981). *Essays on moral development, volume one: The philosophy of moral development, moral stages and the idea of justice*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Lafferty, W.M. (1994). *Research and information for alternative patterns of production and consumption*. Retrieved May 17, 2005 from <http://www.iisd.ca/consume/lafferty.html>
- Libratory pedagogy*. (2005). Retrieved May 23, 2005 from <http://www.holisticeducator.com/libratorypedagogy.html>
- McGregor, S.L.T. (2001). Participatory consumerism. *Consumer Interest Annual*, 47 (online proceedings). Retrieved May 17, 2005 from http://www.consumerinterests.org/files/public/McGregor--Participatory_Consumerism.pdf
- McGregor, S.L.T. (2002). *Consumer citizenship: A pathway to sustainable development?* Keynote at the International Conference on Developing Consumer Citizenship, Hamar, Norway. Available at <http://www.consultmcmgregor.com> (Research Paper # 22).
- McGregor, S.L.T. (2004). The nature of transdisciplinary research and practice. *Kappa Omicron Nu Human Science Working Paper Series*. Retrieved May 17, 2005 <http://www.kon.org/hswp/archive/transdiscipl.pdf>
- McGregor, S.L.T. (in press). Sustainable consumer empowerment through critical consumer education: A typology of consumer education approaches. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey - Bass.

Nègre, A. (1999). *A transdisciplinary approach to science and astrology*. Retrieved May 17, 2005 from <http://cura.free.fr/quinq/02negre2.html>

Nicolescu, B. (1997). *The transdisciplinary evolution of the university condition for sustainable development*. Retrieved May 23, 2005 from http://perso.club_internet.fr/nicol/ciret/bulletin/b12/b12c8.htm

Regeer, B. (2002). *Transdisciplinarity..* Retrieved May 17, 2005 from <http://www.bio.vu.nl/vakgroepen/bens/HTML/transdiscipliNI.html>

Sandlin, J.A. (2004). Consumerism, consumption and a critical consumer education for adults. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 102, 25-34.

Webb, M. (2001). *Lessons of the soul*. Retrieved May 17, 2005 from <http://www.eoni.com/~visionquest/library/lessons3.html>