

Sue. L.T. McGregor. (1999). Towards a rationale for integrating consumer and citizenship education. *Journal of Consumer Studies and Home Economics*, 23(4), 207-211. *Copyright held by Blackwell Sciences Ltd. posted with permission. Prints off at about 5 pages.*

Abstract

Despite the importance of consumer education and citizenship education in contemporary societies, there has been little attempt to bring together the studies of these two fields to understand the developments in which they share an interest. After defining the parameters of consumer education and citizenship education, the paper will begin to develop a rationale for integrating consumer education and citizenship education, striving to identify synergies that could lead to revised consumer education curricula such that people are prepared to be citizens first and consumers second; that is, *consumer-citizens*.

Introduction

In their comments about the recent Consumer Education Development Project in the United Kingdom (1991-1994), Wells and Atherton¹ note that consumer education benefits society as a whole by creating more active and better-informed citizens. If done properly, consumer education can help individuals make decisions which may be concerned with the wider community instead of focused solely on individual self-interest in a market economy. In the same paper, they clarify that, recently, the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) identified "Education for Citizenship" as a theme that could be taught across the curriculum instead of as a separate subject. On the other hand, consumer education is not even seen as a theme in its own right but rather is subsumed under the theme of "Economic and Industrial Understanding". Citizenship education is not explicitly associated with consumer education at all. Instead, it is assumed that the best pairing is to link consumer education with an understanding the economy and the role of industry and the producer instead of the relationship between consumers and other citizens. In his comments on his role in the QCA, relative to citizenship education, Kerr² recommends that elements of citizenship education be combined with other subjects and mentions History and Geography but not consumer education.

Despite the importance of consumer education and citizenship education in contemporary societies, there has been little attempt to bring together the studies of these two fields to understand the developments in which they share an interest. After defining the parameters of consumer education and citizenship education, the paper will begin to develop a rationale for integrating consumer education and citizenship education, striving to identify synergies that could lead to revised consumer education curricula such that people are prepared to be citizens first and consumers second; that is, *consumer-citizens*.

Consumer Education

Wells and Atherton¹ share a very synergistic view of consumer education. They note that consumer education is concerned with the skills, attitudes, knowledge and understandings needed by individuals living in a consumer society such that they can make full use of the range of consumer opportunities present in today's complex marketplace. Those involved in consumer education aim to: (a) protect the interests of consumers, (b) promote an understanding of the systems and structures within the marketplace, and (c) contribute to society as a whole by creating more active and informed citizens leading to a more even balance of power between the producer and the consumer. They confirm that as the marketplace evolves and becomes even more complex consumer competence has to evolve as well; this link implies that consumer education also has to evolve. This paper proposes that one such direction is to integrate consumer education with citizenship education.

Consumer education is comprised of three general areas: (a) consumer decision making (external and internal factors affecting consumer decisions as well as the stages of the decision making process); (b) resource management (personal finance, buying skills and conservation); and (c) citizen participation (consumer protection and advocacy).^{1,3,4,5} As regards citizen participation, Bannister and Monsma³ comment that "in a democratic framework, the ideal citizen understands the operation of the political process and influences public policy through individual and collective action. This same ideal can be applied to the consumer as a citizen in relation to the external settings which provide the environments of consumer decisions. ...[However] few consumer citizens meet the ideal... ." (40) Hellman-Tuiter⁴ explains that consumer education is a way to develop an understanding of one's role as a citizen in economic, social and government systems and how to influence these systems to make them responsive to consumer needs. In a recent document, the United States based National Institute for Consumer Education (NICE)⁵ recognizes that consumer education is a way for consumers to see that their consuming role is linked to their role as a socially responsible citizen.

The basic premise of this paper is that steps need to be taken to ensure that people begin to see themselves as *consumer-citizens* engaging in a life long socialization process with the interest of others and the environment balanced against self interest in the marketplace.^{6,7,8,9,10} When the idea of *citizen* crops up in a discussion of

consumption, it can take on one of two meanings. Some interpret it as the consumer having a vote in the maintenance of the market structure; each time they purchase, they cast their ballot.^{11,12} Conversely, a citizen is "a responsible consumer, a socially-aware consumer, a consumer who thinks ahead and tempers his or her desires by social awareness, a consumer whose actions must be morally defensible and who must occasionally be prepared to sacrifice personal pleasure to communal well-being"¹¹ (175-176).

Citizenship Education

Citizenship is defined as the ongoing contribution of citizens to solving community and public problems and creating the world around us.¹³ Abala-Bertrand¹⁴ identifies two different sources of the concept of citizenship. Republican citizenship stresses three main principles: the sense of belonging to a political community, loyalty towards one's homeland, and the predominance of civic duties over individual interests. The liberal tradition of citizenship focuses on individualism and the central idea that all individuals are equal and have inalienable rights (e.g., human rights) that cannot be revoked by the state or any social institution. Both views prevail today and will be reflected in this discussion.

Just as there are three elements to consumer education, there are three elements to citizenship education: the civil, the political and the social.^{2,14} The civil refers to community involvement, learning about and becoming helpfully involved in the life and concerns of one's community, including learning through community involvement and service to the community. The political refers to learning about and how to make oneself effective in public life. This learning encompasses realistic knowledge of, and preparation for, conflict resolution and decision making, whether involving issues in local, regional, national, continental or international affairs. The social refers to social and moral responsibilities wherein people learn self confidence and socially and morally responsible behaviour both at work or play, at home and towards those in authority and towards each other. Abala-Bertrand¹⁵ identifies four other dimensions of citizenship education: human rights; democracy; human development and a sustainable development ethic; and, peace at the national and international levels.

The ultimate educational objective of citizenship education is an increased rate and higher quality of social participation. The main task for democratic citizens is to deliberate with other citizens about the nature of the public or common, collective good and how to achieve it.¹⁶ Other tasks of citizens in a strong democracy should include debate, deliberation, agenda setting, making public judgements, performing community service by serving in civic and political offices, supporting and working for public interest groups and political parties, and least of all, voting.¹⁷ The result should be education that prepares citizens to forge agreement in pursuit of the common good rather than participation to advance private, individual self interests.¹⁶

Towards a Rationale for Integrating Consumer and Citizenship Education

Wells and Atherton¹ remind us that consumer education is a life-long learning process. Boyte and Skelton,¹³ in turn, remind us that citizenship education is a life-long process as well. To that end, neither consumer education or citizenship education curricula should remain stagnant but be dynamic and evolutionary. This paper will now turn toward a discussion of the rationale for forming synergetic links between consumer education and citizenship education.

Kerr² recognizes the signs of alienation and cynicism among people about public life and participation, leading to possible disconnection and disengagement from it. This disconnection and alienation can transfer to the other roles of the person, including their role as consumer. It is much easier to ignore the impact of one's consumption decisions on other people and the environment if one is disengaged from life and politics in general. If one feels disconnected, feels alone, lacks direction and meaning in life and feels out of control, one will make very different consumer decisions than one who feels part of a larger picture, a connected whole, a global community. Tyack¹⁸ notes that when citizens lose the sense they can shape institutions, it is no wonder they participate less in civic affairs. This line of reasoning can be extended to consumption - if consumers lose the sense that they can shape the marketplace, it is no wonder they become apathetic and participate less critically in the market. Imagine what can happen if people feel lost in both roles - consumer and citizen! Curriculum must be designed to help students fight their feelings of powerlessness and disconnectedness by developing their sense of community and their confidence that they can make a difference in the world,¹⁹ especially in their role as consumer. People need to see themselves as *consumer-citizens* in a life long learning process with "citizen" meaning a responsible, socially aware consumer willing to make reasoned judgements and sacrifices for the common good.⁹

Kerr² refers to "political literacy" and Bannister and Monsma³ refer to "consumer literacy". Why not combine them and strive for a new goal - "consumer-citizen literacy"? It would then be incumbent on consumer educators to blend concepts from both citizenship education and consumer education leading to a powerful synergy and learning experience. People could be socialized to see the links between being a good citizen and being a good consumer. Actions taken in the marketplace would be construed as impacting democracy and citizenship and vice versa. Different consumption decisions would be made and decisions would be made differently. One could equate

consumer-citizenship with the challenge facing all nations of how to prepare and equip people for the incredible pace of change in modern society and in the global marketplace and its impact on various aspects of their lives, the lives of others and the environment. The role of consumer-citizenship education is to help people appreciate their roles and responsibilities as individual consumers at the same time they think about the consequences of their actions on other citizens, communities and societies (adapted from Kerr²). Paraphrasing Berman,¹⁹ curricula could be designed for the development of *consumer-citizenship consciousness*. Becoming socially responsible means using this consciousness to intervene to improve one's ability to live, spend and work together.

Furthermore, each person develops a relationship with society, the world and the marketplace. The way each person gives meaning to that relationship determines the nature of their participation in the society, the world and the marketplace. Berman¹⁹ eloquently notes that relationships are important because people do not make moral decisions in isolation. This insight has implications given the current isolation and disconnectedness people feel in relation to each other and the market. Moral decisions taken as citizens or consumers lose their meaning in such a barren environment. Such moral free market decisions lead to infringements on the environment, future generations and those living in other countries. If people were sensitized to see themselves as consumer-citizens, a sense of morality, ethics and community could emerge again in the world. A community is a group of people who acknowledge their interconnectedness, have a sense of their common purpose, respect their differences, share responsibility for the actions of the group and support each other's growth. Community is part of citizenship education. If citizenship education becomes associated with consumer education, then it makes sense that consumers become concerned for the welfare of the global community and the impact of their individual and collective consumption behaviour. If there is no civic virtue among people, but only personal and private virtue,²⁰ then consumption may never take on a global perspective wherein people are sensitive to the impact of their decisions on others and the environment. The author agrees with Abala-Bertrand¹⁴ who said that "social cohesion needs a renewed image of citizenship which is not based simply on economic considerations" (web citation). By extension, consumption behaviour needs a renewed image of consumerism which is not based simply on economic considerations. Merging consumer education with citizenship education brings us closer to this renewal of curricula.

Democracy relies on strong, active citizenship inside and outside of government. As well, the economy depends on strong, active consumption behaviour. Both of these, democracy and the economy, are dependent on institutions. The resounding response to the failure of these institutions to deal with common social problems and living conditions has been to restructure or reinvent the institutions. What is needed instead is to reinvent citizenship¹³ and, within the argument developed in this paper, reinvent consumers. This will remain a difficult task unless consumer education and citizenship education are integrated since citizens and consumers tend to see themselves in narrow roles, not as public actors or as global consumers, respectively. Boyte and Skelton¹³ claim that narrow conceptions of politics and public affairs limit the roles people can play in public life. In close parallel, the narrow conceptions of the market and the economy limit the roles people play in their consumer life. Few would claim the title of citizen because its meaning has become thin and weak¹³ but everyone claims to be a consumer, even though its meaning has become thin and weak as well¹¹ (some will contest this latter point). The time is right to merge the notions of consumer-citizenship leading to an opportunity to socialize people to be responsible, socially aware consumers willing to make reasoned judgements and sacrifices for the common good. Cotton²¹ notes that the people concerned with the common good possess compassion, ethical commitment, social responsibility and a sense of interdependence among people and between people and their environments.

Cotton²¹ expresses concern that citizenship education curricula often virtually ignores the global context within which countries are situated. The same has been said for consumer education.^{8,9} Integrating these two fields of instruction can lead to a powerful synergy from which to prepare global consumer-citizens. Some could argue that education for citizenship and education for consumption are in conflict or, at best, not closely related. This concern can be mitigated if a global perspective is brought to the curricula. A global perspective better ensures that educators strengthen the students' ability to see the world context thereby not distorting values and interests in this growing era of global interdependence. Citizen behaviour affects the public life of a nation and consumer behaviour affects the nature of the marketplace, locally and globally. From a citizenship perspective, a good consumer would think twice before making a consumption decision that impacted negatively on the life of citizens in other countries. Conversely, from a consumer perspective, a good citizen would think twice before acting in such a way that their voice in the democratic process is lost or compromised. There is profound interdependence between the political, social and economic spheres - consumer-citizenship can balance this relationship in synergistic ways. It would enable students to gain an appreciation of the links between the values and principles of the market economy and the values and principles of a democracy, often seen to be at odds with each other.

The Centre for Civic Education²² recently developed a conceptual framework for Education for Democratic Citizenship comprised of five elements: (a) the world, (b) the people, (c) the polity, (d) the government, and (e) the

citizen. The citizen is expanded to include relations with the first four elements and with other individual citizens. There is no mention of people in their consumption role. Kroll⁷ provides an intriguing view of the consumer and places them in a citizenship role. He explains that the consumer interest needs to be expanded to include perceiving the consumer as a citizen concerned with the public good. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on how this role can be enhanced or facilitated by consumer education. This paper proposes that merging these two areas of study is a productive way to bring a consumer-citizen perspective to consumer education.

Finally, we are faced with the hard reality that what is taking place in society and culture is rarely taken into account by the official curricula. And, often, there is a lag between the evolution of institutions, including the marketplace and the economy, and social norms.¹⁴ This is true in the case of both citizenship education and consumer education. Neither curricula seems to be able to account for the synergy between being a consumer and being a citizen or for the massive changes in civil society and the marketplace. On the other hand, it makes no sense to hold the consumer studies curricula alone accountable for educating people in their role as a consumer. As well, it makes no sense to hold the citizenship curricula alone accountable for educating people in their role as a citizen. Merging principles, concepts, knowledge and skills from both curricula could lead to the development of consumer-citizens, a laudable goal for educators as we move into the next century. The consumer culture could be transformed so that people are provoked to reach out of their private worlds to the shared, public global community. Motivating consumers to participate in the marketplace as active and informed citizens has always been a goal of consumer education^{1,3,4,5,7} and connecting with citizenship education is a way to make this a reality.

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