

## **Linking Consumer Rights With Citizen Roles: An Opportunity for Consumer Educators**

*Georgia L. Stevens  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

In the U.S., young adults aged 18 to 30 are far less likely to read newspapers than young people a generation ago, and they watch less news on television. Consequently, they are less able to identify critical issues and events, as reported in research conducted by the Times Mirror Center for The People and The Press (1990). Translated, this probably means that young adults are less likely to become actively involved in public issues.

Yet, we can find examples to the contrary. As David Broder (1990), *Washington Post* syndicated columnist, observes, "not all youths are tuning out on participation" (p. B-7). He reports that young people are involved in many activities including school and community service projects, voter registration, and food drives.

Focusing on young adults through the lens of human development provides additional insight and incentive for action by educators, researchers, and practitioners. A recently published study by the Institute for Social Research (Staff, 1989/90) suggests that adolescence and early adulthood are the primary developmental periods for "generational imprinting" of political events and social changes. If this is the case, then teaching students about roles of consumers as citizens may well yield a lifelong impact. This article discusses the need for teaching young adults about consumer/citizen roles within the consumer education curriculum and suggests three approaches to expanding those roles within the community.

### **An Evolving Model for The Consumer/Citizen**

So, it appears that young people either go the way of citizen apathy, or they take the more preferred path—that of citizen participation. What makes the difference? Do their choices happen by default? Can education influence their choices? Have we as consumer educators framed our curricula to make a difference?

Consumer educators can readily cite consumers' rights: the rights to safety, to be informed, to choose, and to be heard. In the curriculum, however, these consumers' rights may often be reduced to buyers' rights—information that helps consumers make purchase decisions. But, consumers have a right to access and consume more than just material goods and services. They have a right to also use the public good—which by definition should be available to them as members of society.

These rights also imply responsibilities—a necessary link in developing the consumer/citizen role. Many media writers label this phenomenon as reinventing citizenship and compare it to the current concern for reinventing government (Geyer, 1993). Philosopher/scholar Boyte (1989) asserts that citizens must accept grassroots responsibilities as the foundation for promoting the common good necessary to a changing world. Sociologist Etzioni (1993) challenges citizens to rethink individual rights and emphasize social or community responsibilities. These trends challenge educators to seek methods that help students learn and accept their responsibilities as citizens and consumers.

Educators have long recognized the effectiveness of using projects to help students apply the scientific method to societal improvement. Educational philosopher John Dewey (1966) in his classic book first published in 1916 encourages the school to create an atmosphere that develops citizenship within democracy. Brookfield (1989) encourages political learning by helping students to become critically aware of issues of power and control in relationships, social structures, and economic arrangements, to work collectively for change, and to question the basis upon which individuals, groups, and systems exercise power over others' lives.

Yankelovich (1991) challenges citizens to make democracy work in this complex world by developing "public judgment." He defines public judgment as "the state of highly developed public opinion that exists once people have engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make" (p. 6). The result is an informed public.

Consumers and citizens need experience-based knowledge and skills to effectively exercise rights and assume responsibilities (Stevens, 1991). An experiential learning activity helps students to understand the depth of an issue by being guided through a life-like activity. The

experience is transferable to the world beyond the classroom and prepares them for later life (Joyce, Weil, & Showers, 1992; Walter & Marks, 1981).

### Helping Students Live Consumer/Citizen Roles

Today it is critical that educators facilitate student transfer of book knowledge into real life and prepare students to function within a changing world. We live in a dynamic society deeply imbedded in a complex global community.

Educators can help students engage with the world by providing group settings where students can actively hear and discuss societal issues and problems. Students can be encouraged to document community needs and organize, express concern, and take action on critical issues. Educators can support and encourage community/volunteer service that connects students with the world beyond the classroom (Brookfield, 1989; Stevens, 1991; Yankelovich, 1991). Nationally, legislation has encouraged and supported many models designed to extend service learning through civic participation at the high school and college levels (Shumer, 1993).

The challenge for the teacher is not only to move students from passive to active learning, but perhaps also to fit another curriculum segment into an already busy schedule. Therefore, a progression of activities can assist the teacher and student in building consumer/citizen roles. Three examples are presented. (Addresses for cited resource materials are provided at the end of this article.)

#### *National Issues Forums*

If students can actively hear or talk about a problem, they may demonstrate a higher level of concern about the issue (Hrubala, 1989; "Teens Learn," 1992). National Issues Forums (NIF), sponsored by the Kettering Foundation for the last ten years, provides a model for bringing citizens, including high school and college students, together in schools, churches, or other organizations to discuss some of America's most controversial and complex issues.

Students can derive several benefits from participation in NIF. Forums provide students with the experience of listening to other viewpoints, participating in dialogue to sort out personal values, and

working through the hard choices presented by the issue being studied. In the past, forums have dealt with topics such as drugs, AIDS, the federal deficit, child care, abortion, racial inequality, and health care.

To prepare for the forums, participants are first asked to read an issue booklet that details a range of alternatives and potential consequences for each option. Teachers can select booklets from three reading levels to accommodate the abilities of their students.

High school and college students participate in forums organized by teachers or community leaders. The Forums are designed to stimulate exchange on thought-provoking subjects (Hrubala, 1989; "Teens Learn," 1992). Before discussion of the issue begins, participants cast ballots to register their opinions. A videotape may be used to highlight the alternatives and consequences surrounding the issue. Then, all forum participants are encouraged to speak and ask questions in the group discussion. At the conclusion, participants again vote their opinions. A national summary of the votes from local Forums is sent to national policymakers as an expression of citizen concern about the issue, reflecting citizen opinions, both before and after group discussion.

### *Community Needs Assessments*

Statements such as "the problem just doesn't exist here" or "our town is different" may sound familiar. These responses are typical when community leaders are faced with concerns such as at-risk behaviors of young adults or the lack of before-and-after-school supervision for school-age children.

How can concerned citizens create recognition of and action on such issues? Research shows that a needs assessment can provide the means to clearly express concerns and provide an impetus for influencing decision making (Summers, 1987). Further, community recognition, concern, and action on issues at the local level are the foundation of a democracy.

A community needs assessment documents reality and identifies strengths and weaknesses in existing services. One example is the SEARCH Institute Survey that examines youth risk behaviors to alert and inform citizens about those issues. Other communities have documented the need for school-age child care using a community

needs assessment process originally developed by Wisconsin Cooperative Extension.

Evidence for issue recognition may also be found in existing data sources. Local and state social services or education departments may have information about demographics and conditions that affect residents. Recent census data and annual reports from the vital statistics unit of the department of health can provide basic data. Community groups and agencies may regularly collect information that can support an issue recognition activity.

Lacking appropriate data, high school or college students might conduct their own community study. With adult guidance, students can research the availability of background information, seek permission to conduct a study, design or adapt a questionnaire, computer code the data, analyze and write the summary of results.

Locally collected data provide an excellent opportunity for students to interact with key influential persons in their community. Early involvement of media, and perhaps policymakers, will enhance recognition of the problem and likely build greater community support. The eventual involvement of policymakers, of course, is crucial to community change and action.

### *Community/Volunteer Service*

Service experiences connect students with the world beyond the classroom (Andress & Roehlkepartain, 1993). Students broaden their perspective as the school reaches into the community to provide beneficial services. Issues that challenge students for solutions can become more than just textbook examples and students can learn and practice consumer/citizen roles.

Junior high, senior high, or college students can develop leadership skills by providing activities for elementary children on school-release days. Older students assume responsibility for planning and managing activities for the younger children. In Nebraska, Cooperative Extension has established the KIDS' TEAM project that addresses youth-at-risk issues by building community coalitions. An early issue identified in many communities is the lack of adult supervision and activities for school-age children on school-release days. In several communities, local high school teachers have facilitated formation of these community coalitions. They have teamed students with key

community and business leaders including the manager of a senior citizens' center and directors of youth groups such as Girl Scouts, Future Homemakers of America, and Campfire Boys and Girls.

A curriculum box developed by the project contains almost 500 activities designed to enable elementary children to plan their school-release day. A facilitator's guide provides helpful suggestions for working with school-age children and a self-guided videotape illustrates stages of child development. The project is kept to a manageable size by limiting the program to the 10 or 12 school release days throughout the school year.

Many community coalitions have moved beyond the issue of school release days to address other critical issues facing their communities. Examples include parenting education, before-and-after school child care, summer day camp programs, babysitting clinics, creation of a teen center, and a guide to community activities for youth and families. In each of these responses to community issues, young adults have lived the roles of consumer/citizens.

### The Challenge and an Opportunity

Consumer educators can develop and enhance the roles of consumer/citizens when they create curricula that link the rights of consumers with the responsibilities of citizens. Experiential learning can facilitate a deeper understanding of issues that are transferable to the world beyond the classroom. Teaching students about their roles as consumers/citizens may well have lifelong impact. Such impact is more likely if students actively encounter curricula that bring them in contact with political events and social changes.

Innovative consumer/citizen curricula include strategies that encourage dialogue on issues, conducting community needs assessments to determine local perceptions of issues, and creating community or volunteer service opportunities that connect students with the community. Students can learn and practice their roles as consumer/citizens—benefitting their communities and themselves.

### References

- Andress, I.S. & Roehlkepartain, E.C. (1993, March). Involving youth in community service-learning. *Source*, 9 (1), p.3. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.
- Boyte, H.C. (1989). *Commonwealth: A return to citizen politics*. New York: Macmillan, Inc.
- Broder, D. (1990, July 1). Civic needs prompt responses. *Washington Post*, p. B-7.
- Brookfield, S.D. (1989). *Developing critical thinkers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dewey, J. (1966). *Democracy and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Etzioni, A. (1993). *The spirit of community*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Geyer, G.A. (1993, April 5). Need now is to reinvent citizenship. *Lincoln Journal*, p. 8.
- Hrubala, S.D. (1989). A change of pace: The student's role in educating for citizenship. In Morse, S.W. (Ed.) *Public leadership education: Preparing college students for their civic roles* (pp. 29-36). Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation.
- Joyce, B., Weil, M., & Showers, B. (1992). *Models of teaching* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Shumer, R. (1993, Spring). Learning about service. *Public Life*, 4 (2), p. 11. Minneapolis, MN: Project Public Life, Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.
- Staff. (1989/90). Generational memories. *Institute for Social Research Newsletter*, 16 (3). Ann Arbor, MI: Survey Research Center-Institute for Social Research.
- Stevens, G.L. (1991). Consumer education and public policy education: More similarities than differences. *Journal of Consumer Education*, 9, 14-19.
- Summers, G.F. (1987). Democratic governance. In D.E. Johnson, L.R. Meiller, L.C. Miller, & G.F. Summers (Eds.), *Needs assessment: Theory and methods* (pp. 1-19). Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Teens learn and practice public skills through NIF. (1992). *NIF News*, p. 6.

- Times Mirror Center for The People and The Press. (1990). *The age of indifference: A study of young Americans and how they view the news*. Washington, D.C.: Times Mirror. (Available from the Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, 1875 Eye Street, N.W., Suite 1110, Washington, DC 20006)
- Walter, G.A. & Marks, S.E. (1981). *Experiential learning and change: Theory, design and practice*. New York: Wiley.
- Yankelovich, D. (1991). *Coming to public judgment*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

#### Addresses For Cited Resources

- KIDS' TEAM community coalitions. Dr. Georgia Stevens, Cooperative Extension, 116 Home Economics, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68583-0801. Phone 402-472-5518.
- National Issues Forums, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, OH 45459-2777. Phone 1-800-433-7834.
- School-Age Child Care Community Assessments. Dr. Dave Riley, 1300 Linden Drive, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Madison, WI 53706. Phone 608-262-6766.
- SEARCH Institute, 700 South Third Street, Suite 210, Minneapolis, MN 55415. Phone 1-800-888-7828.

*Georgia L. Stevens, PhD, is Extension Family Economics Policy Specialist and Associate Professor, College of Human Resources and Family Sciences, 116 Home Economics, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68583-0801, (402) 472-5518.*

#### Note

The author gratefully acknowledges colleague Wesley D. Daberkow for consultation and review of this article -- from concept through revision for publication.

