

Global Consumer Education: Its Time Has Come

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Consumer education was originally conceived in a time when consumers functioned in a domestic marketplace. To accommodate the complexity of the global marketplace, consumer education must continue to move toward a global perspective. To that end, McGregor (1994b) extended the conventional definition of consumer education (Bannister & Monsma, 1982):

Consumer education is a life long socialization process provided to individual and family consuming units of varying consumption ages and structures such that they can accumulate, in a progressive, empowering manner, the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours considered necessary for managing resources, engaging in rational consumption behaviour and taking actions as citizens. This includes coping with, adapting to and influencing and dealing with the impact of economic, social, ecological, political, and technological systems at the micro, macro and global levels such that individual, familial and societal betterment results. (McGregor, 1994b, pp.24-25)

This definition represents an emerging effort to define global consumer education to include: universal values, global interconnections, global interdependence, world conditions, global problems, global citizenship, stewardship, and a moral community. Also, it embraces a holistic approach, is macroscopic, and advocates for ecological responsibility, humanitarianism, and contextualism. Global consumer education also includes critical thinking, value clarification, values reasoning, and ethics education. It challenges materialism and commercialism and compels us to examine the citizen engaging in a lifelong consumer socialization process.

What is a global perspective?

We are making consumer decisions in an emerging global community (Peterson, 1993); hence, our curriculum for consumer education should reflect a global perspective. Succinctly, a global perspective consists "of the information, attitudes, awareness, and skills which taken together, can help individuals understand the world, how they affect others, and how others affect them" (Babich cited in Smith, 1993, p.19).

Smith and Peterat (1992) developed 14 global principles (see Table 1) which McGregor and Greenfield (1995) established as a valuable tool for ascertaining a global presence in the consumer education curriculum. It is also useful for the development of a globally sensitive curriculum. Global principles allow educators to extend traditional consumer education concepts to include: advertising and the transmission of culturally sensitive messages; recreation, tourism and the pursuit of leisure at the expense of third world country citizens and lands; non-market based economies and resultant consumer problems; international trade and the consumer interest, especially in developing countries; ethical investing; national debts; and sustainable life style choices.

Lusby's (1992) conceptualization of global consumer education complements Smith and Peterat's (1992) global principles. She contributed the concepts of: consumer ethics, the ecosystem perspective, the cradle to grave product and service perspective, and the concept of local, domestic and global realms. Her conceptualization was partially based on and embraces McGregor's family member involvement (FMI) perspective to consumer decision making. The FMI approach assumes that the family is the unit of analysis making consumer decisions rather than the individual with the family acting as a reference group. It focuses on the involvement of family members during a consumption decision for goods or services, now including those with global implications, and is concerned with: the quality and amount of interaction, the extent of involvement and participation, the patterns of decision making and the influence and power among family members during the different stages of a consumer decision (McGregor, 1994b). Lusby advocated a paradigm shift from *ego-* (me centered) to *eco-* centered (global ecosystem based) consumer decisions and called for a macro, holistic, ecological approach to educating citizens to be consumers.

Global consumer education and ethics education

In her discussion of ethics education in the family and consumer economics curricula, Peterson (1993) listed many dichotomies relevant to a discussion of global consumer education (see Table 2). She noted that ethical theories deal with our responsibilities to each other as we live together in human communities. She argued that, from an ethical, moral perspective, consumer educators are not free to ignore the effects of consumer choices on other's lives (those living elsewhere or not yet born). Further, both Peterson (1993) and Garman (1992) suggested that, rather than simply teaching *how* to buy, we also need to teach students to think about *what* to buy. Lusby (1992) would extend this to include *whether* to buy at all thus challenging materialism and commercialism.

Table 1. Dimensions of a Global Perspective

| <u>Dimensions</u> | <u>Principles</u> |
|---|--|
| Perspective consciousness | Our view of the world is not universally shared. |
| State of the planet awareness. | We must be aware of prevailing and merging world conditions and developments. |
| Cross cultural awareness | We must appreciate that there are a diversity of ideas and practices found in human societies and communities. |
| -42- Knowledge of global dynamics | A modest comprehension of key traits and mechanisms of the world system is necessary. |
| Aware of human choices and alternatives | We must be aware of problems related to choices facing people and nations and how these choices change as one gains a consciousness of global systems. |
| Balanced development | Demands on local supply to support development initiatives should not place undue strain on local supply. |
| Voluntary simplicity | We should strive to create a lifestyle by streamlining and simplifying personal possessions and consumption. |

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|--|--|
| Complementary technology | Technology introduced into a country should be compatible with or not compromise local indigenous technology or how it is passed on. |
| International reciprocity | We must appreciate that each culture has much to give and much to gain from cross cultural interactions. |
| Sustainable lifestyles | We must ensure that our current collective lifestyle renews and supports rather than harms the environment and ecosystem, other people and future generations. |
| Systems consciousness | We need the ability to think in a systems mode rather than a dualistic mode (expand beyond cause/effect; problem/solution; local/global). |
| -43- Involvement consciousness and preparedness | We need to appreciate that the choices we make and actions we take have repercussions for the global present and in the future, even for those not born yet or those in another country. |
| Process mindedness | We need to appreciate that learning and personal development are a continuous journey with no fixed or final destination (lifelong learning and socialization process). |
| Responsible value deliberations and moral justifications for decisions | We must base consumer and resource management decisions on values as well as facts; make decisions on the basis of good reasons rather than force, self interest, fear, habit, or customs. |

Materialism, commercialism and global consumer education

Lusby's (1992) intuition that we give due consideration to *whether or not to buy* compels global consumer educators to give serious consideration to the concepts of materialism and commercialism and their impact on buying behavior and values. Friedman (1993) defined materialism as "a cultural system in which [individual] material interests are not made subservient to other social goals" (p. 24). Jacobson (1993) contended that people are being "reared to be consumers in the marketplace, not citizens in a community" (p. 30). He argued that commercialism is comprised of "ubiquitous product [and service] marketing that leads to a preoccupation with individual consumption to the detriment of society" (p. 30). Stevens (1994) "challenges citizens to rethink individual rights and emphasize *social or community responsibilities*" (p. 2) and believes that "teaching students about roles of *consumers as citizens* may well yield a *lifelong* impact [italics added]" (p. 1).

Consumer rights and human rights

To better ensure an inherent respect for the rights of humans in the global community, citizens should be taught to appreciate the impact of their consumption decisions on the basic human rights of citizens in developing countries. They need to recognize that sometimes human rights need to supersede consumer rights or at least become part of the consumer decision making equation (all consumer rights assume the basic human rights; see table 3). How else can students begin to understand the world, how they affect others, and how others affect them; that is, embrace the global perspective (McGregor & Greenfield, 1995)?

Consider the following examples of consumer decisions encompassing human rights. Would teens continue to buy brand name running shoes if they were aware of the child labor involved in their production? Would they continue to purchase items of clothing if they realized that the women who make them work in hazardous, unregulated sweat shops earning only \$1.50 per day? Would they want to purchase new drugs if they knew they had been tested on third world citizens without their knowledge? Would they buy instant coffee if they knew that only 8% of the profit goes to the local third world farmer who grew and picked the beans while the rests goes to transnational corporations? A global perspective of the marketplace involves an examination of social structure, living and work conditions, health policies, profit sharing and fair business practices, of justice and education (Lusby, 1991).

Table 2. Comparison of Mind Set of Traditional versus Global Consumer Education

| <u>Traditional Consumer Education</u> | <u>Global Consumer Education</u> |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| ● local and immediate | ● those who live elsewhere or not yet born |
| ● economic vote | ● moral vote |
| ● decision maker | ● reasoner |
| ● consumer choice | ● moral choice |
| ● economic utility | ● duty, character, justice, courage, generosity |
| ● productivity and efficiency | ● fairness and generational plus external costs |
| ● self interest | ● societal interest on global scale |
| ● consumer in marketplace | ● citizen in global community |

Table 3. Comparison of Basic Human Rights and Basic Consumer Rights

| <u>Basic human rights^a</u> | <u>Basic consumer rights^b</u> |
|--|--|
| <i>Security</i> : from killing, torture, arrest or detention | Information |
| <i>Participation</i> : vote, voice in policy, express opinions, association in groups | Choice |
| <i>Welfare</i> : education, health | Safety and health, Voice in policy |
| <i>Non-discrimination</i> : gender rights, cultural rights | Redress, Environment |
| <i>Political institutions</i> : rule of law, legislature, executive, judicial military | Consumer education Privacy Fairness/economics security |

^aUlrich, 1994, p. 2

^bMcGregor, 1994a

Conclusion

McGregor's (1994b) definition of global consumer education includes the premise of a lifelong socialization process leading to consumption decisions resulting in the betterment of individuals, families and societies. Consumer education practitioners alter the "consumer socialization" process through education. Further, consumer education is a social responsibility as well as a right (Vosburgh, 1992). Following this logic, if we want to raise citizens who consider the impact of their consumption decisions on others' lives, we must bring a global perspective to consumer education; its time has come.

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Notes

To obtain Linda Lusby's model and the work by Gale Smith and Linda Peterat (each \$10.00 Cdn), contact the Canadian Home Economics Association, 307-151 Slater Street, Ottawa, ON K1P 5H3 Phone 1-902-238-8817; FAX 238-8972. Project Real World can be purchased from the Manitoba Textbook Bureau, 277 Hutchings Street, Winnipeg, MN, Canada, R2X 2R4. 1-204-945-8940