

## Examining Consumer Concerns Through Gap Analysis

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As consumers we encounter both immediate consumer problems and continuing concerns (Browne & Keeley, 1998; King & Kitchener, 1994). Consumer education should examine both of these problems in order to more fully prepare students as consumers within the family, community and global society (McGregor & Greenfield, 1996; Pritchard & Myers, 1992). Traditionally, however, consumer education has focused on learning about immediate consumer problems and how to solve them (e.g., how to buy products or how to live economically). Classroom teachers, as well as community educators, need to ensure, however, that learners focus on the continuing concerns of consumers. Continuing concerns require attention because they are significant questions that must be addressed through reflective judgement and action. The purpose of this paper is to describe gap analysis as one way to assist learners in thinking about consumer concerns.

### Characteristics of Continuing Concerns

In order to take an inquiry-oriented approach, continuing concerns are stated in the form of a question (Brown, 1978). Examples of continuing concerns include: What should be done about the inequitable treatment of consumers? What should be done about the family's purchasing power? What should be done about the consumer's role in health and housing policies? Each broad question may include several sub-questions. The question "what should be done about the relationship between the consumer and the environment?" may include sub-questions such as: What should be done about consumer choices? What should be done about recycling? What should be done regarding humans' impact upon the environment?

Continuing concerns are perennial problems that occur from generation to generation. These are problems which need to be dealt with in order to achieve particular societal conditions, such as freedom, equality and consumer rights (Brown, 1978). These conditions are never achieved permanently; there is a continual search for individual, family, societal or global improvement.

Continuing concerns are also value-related problems which have an ethical component and may require choices between competing goals and values (Reid, 1979). For example, should there be an increase in the minimum wage or the maintenance of low production costs in the manufacturing of clothing? Should plastic be used for producing

inexpensive toys or should producers be encouraged to use materials which are biodegradable and more costly? In order to resolve continuing concerns we need to have an understanding of the values associated with the problem and the ultimate goal or valued end.

Movement toward resolving continuing concerns is achieved through reflective judgement and action (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). Potential resolution of the problem may include several forms of action: technical, communicative and emancipative actions. Technical actions are those which focus on how to achieve the goal. Communicative actions are those which focus on achieving mutual understanding regarding beliefs or values. Emancipative actions are those connected to empowerment, such as having a voice regarding consumer issues or policies, or gaining control and resolving one's own consumer issues. The actions needed are determined through reflective judgement. One strategy for engaging in reflection and examination of continuing concerns is the process of gap analysis.

### Examining Continuing Concerns Through Gap Analysis

Gap analysis is a detailed examination of the discrepancy that exists between "what is" and "what should be" (Boyle, 1981; Brown, 1980). "What is" describes the current conditions which exist, the context or current state of affairs regarding the concern. "What should be" describes that which is more desirable, the valued ends or the ideal state of affairs.

Continuing concerns appear in concrete ways and can be examined through the context of the problem (Reid, 1979). The current state of affairs, or context, describes the circumstances surrounding the problem including historical, economic, political, personal, social, global or cultural dimensions. Across time, the continuing concern may manifest itself in different ways but the underlying concern remains the same. An understanding of the continuing concern is developed through an examination of the current state of affairs.

To fully examine the problem it is also necessary to identify "what should be" or the ideal state of affairs. There are often multiple perspectives about what the desirable goals or valued ends should be regarding continuing concerns. The valued end or desired goal needs to be a bias-free principle that all can agree upon in order to ethically and morally move toward a resolution of the problem. Persons with various perspectives on this concern should be able to agree to these principles. Examples of valued ends-statements include: All individuals and families should have access to resources. Both the consumer and seller have rights and responsibilities. Goods and services should be

economical (Laster, 1998). These statements are not specific solutions but rather describe an ideal societal condition.

### Gap Analysis Process

The gap analysis process can be used as an educational strategy to examine continuing concerns (Johnson & Montgomery, 1997). This process may be completed by individuals, pairs or small groups of students. The first step in the analysis process is to identify a question of continuing concern. (See Figure 1 as an example of a gap analysis process.) A chart of the gap analysis may help to organize students' thinking and serve as the foundation of a written paper. Although the process is described here in a linear format, the gap analysis process is a cycle of questioning, hypothesizing, and gathering and interpreting evidence. The process is described more fully in the section below.

*Create an initial list of questions related to the concern.* Students generate a list of questions that are important to ask about the concern. The teacher helps to facilitate this process by asking students to consider questions such as: What factors about the context need to be considered? What are the valued ends or goals related to this concern? How might these goals differ from alternative perspectives? What are the consequences of resolving, or not resolving, this concern? What are alternative strategies or actions which could help resolve this concern?

These questions may be grouped together in categories (e.g. context, valued end, alternative strategies, and consequence questions) to help students further synthesize their thinking and/or develop additional questions. From these groups of questions learners further identify the sub-questions to be addressed, for example: What is the purpose of advertising? What are the economic factors associated with advertising? (See Figure 1). Students complete a peer review regarding the meaning and clarity of the questions and revise as needed.

*Develop initial thinking on the "current state of affairs" or "what is."* Students next hypothesize one or more potential answers to the questions identified. For example, in response to the question, What is the purpose of advertising, the student may hypothesize that "Companies need to advertise in order to get consumers to buy products" (see Figure 1). Hypotheses could be based on one or more the following: the learner's own thinking and experiences, references or other information, such as a case study which illustrates the concern, could be provided by the teacher, or other forms of information such as video tapes and newspaper articles. After hypotheses are developed, students peer check statements and revise answers.

Figure 1. Gap Analysis Process  
Continuing Concern: What should be done about advertising?

Question	Current State of Affairs	Ideal State of Affairs
What is the purpose of advertising?	Companies need to advertise in order to get consumers to buy products.	Advertisers need to keep consumer rights in mind.
What are the economic factors associated with advertising?	Companies spend many dollars. If advertising did not exist, consumer costs would be reduced.	Dollars could be spent to improve consumers lives.
What are different types/forms of advertising?	Different types of advertising are used to target different groups.	Consumers have a right to bias-free information.
What power does the consumer have to respond or not respond to advertising?	Consumers are influenced by advertising.	Consumers can recognize and understand manipulative advertisements.
What are some solutions to control the influence of advertising in our lives?	The government tries to prevent deceptive advertising.	Consumers recognize deceptive advertising and help shape policies.

*Develop initial thinking on the "ideal state of affairs" or "what should be."* These statements should be underlying human principles that all persons could generally agree upon. The teacher asks students to consider; Can persons from other perspectives agree upon the valued end statements? Examples of valued-end statements include advertisers need to keep consumer rights in mind and consumers have a right to bias-free information (see Figure 1). Students again conduct a peer check of statements and revise statements as needed.

*Investigate the problem and develop the final gap analysis.* Students find resources to support or revise the current state and ideal state affairs. Ideally resources should be bias-free. Teachers may need to work with students to develop criteria in order to identify value-free resources or alternative perspectives (Browne & Keeley, 1998). Students make additions and revise statements based upon their investigation.

*Validate the gap analysis.* The students present and explain their gap analysis to others, and listen to other students when they present their gap analysis. Students should ask questions about ideas that do not seem clear. In addition, students compare their gap analysis to one which is similar to their own. Students may also read additional references and make changes based on readings or examine the concern from an alternative perspective (e.g., economic status, culture, race, gender, age, etc.).

*Debrief and discuss the gap analysis.* To help students further understand the gap analysis process, the teacher leads a discussion. Discussion questions might include: How did your understanding of the continuing concern change over time? What insights did you gain about this concern? What perspectives were evident as you examined resources about the specific concern? How did the gap analysis process impact your own thinking about the concern?

### Implications for Teachers and Educators

Teachers and community educators can help individuals learn to address the concerns of consumers through gap analysis. This process provides a framework for examining consumer issues, engaging learners in thinking through the process of analysis and examining continuing concerns from multiple perspectives. In addition, it also provides a process for developing a rationale to address consumer problems and identifies direction for reasoned action.

The process of gap analysis should be more than a class activity. Ideally, learners would develop a plan of action and implement this plan. To facilitate this process, teachers and community educators may work together to structure real-world learning experiences. For example, educators may help students identify specific needs related to their community, state or region, help identify important data sources, information or key policy makers. Teachers and community educators may form teams with students to further develop action plans regarding the concern.

Continuing concerns should be an important component of consumer education. Learners need to be prepared to examine continuing

concerns for both the present and future consumer world. The gap analysis process is one way to help learners understand these concerns.

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