

More Than Technical Skills: Consumer Education and a Critical Pedagogy of Consumption

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The purpose of this article is to advocate for a more critical form of consumer education that pushes past the traditional focus on teaching technical skills about how to operate more efficiently within the consumer system and encourages learners to question the assumptions of the existing consumer culture. While research and practice in K-12 and adult education increasingly are grounded in critical perspectives (Denzin, 2001; Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Murray & Ozanne, 1991; Murray, Ozanne, & Shapiro, 1994; Ozanne & Murray, 1995 and in the field of education; Apple, 1990; Freire, 1985; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Lankshear, 1987; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992), there has been a lack of integration of these ideas into consumer education research and practice.

This article briefly reviews how consumer education has traditionally been constructed, then outlines a vision for a more critical consumer education termed a "critical pedagogy of consumption." The goal is to start a dialogue among consumer educators about the fundamental purposes of consumer education and to begin advocating for a different kind of consumer education—one informed by the critical-theory based work occurring in the field of consumer research.

Traditional Consumer Education

Consumer education has been defined as the "process of gaining knowledge and skills to manage personal resources and to participate in social, political, and economic decisions that affect individual well being and the public good" (Bannister, 1996, p. 1). Throughout the history of consumer education, practitioners concerned themselves with improving the "economic level of

living for all citizens” (Bannister, p. 5), and have focused on three broad areas of education: consumer choice and decision making, personal resource management, and citizen participation (Bannister & Monsma, 1980). More recently, the National Institute for Consumer Education (NICE) (1996) outlined a new “blueprint” for consumer education and called for a renewed consumer education effort in the United States. In this blueprint, NICE argued that since consumers today operate within a complex marketplace characterized by massive amounts of information, more product choices, and more opportunity for fraud, they require a wider range of skills and knowledge than ever before. NICE posited that consumer education can create knowledgeable consumers who are better equipped to participate effectively in the modern marketplace. Learners involved in traditional consumer education thus are taught more informed ways to navigate the consumer world and better ways of making consumer decisions. This kind of consumer is the goal of traditional consumer education (Ozanne & Murray, 1995).

The dominant message in public rhetoric and mainstream consumer education literature and practice stresses the positive goals and benefits of consumer education; the focus of consumer education has been on teaching technical skills that create savvy and knowledgeable consumers. Habermas (1971) posits that educators present “technical” aspects of knowledge as though they were value-free, objective, and based on assumptions of control and certainty. In this construction, to be an “informed consumer” one needs to know “technical” information such as how to calculate interest rates and what investments yield the highest returns. More fundamental questions about the purposes of consumer education, who has determined those purposes, and what *should* be the purpose – have not been asked nor answered to any great extent. Examining the unstated goals of consumer education and the values and messages implicit in consumer education—that is, examining the *politics* of consumer education—is necessary in order to ensure that consumer education is serving both learners and society at large.

Critical Pedagogy and Critical Consumer Research

The field of critical pedagogy offers some insights into how to begin examining the values and messages implicit in consumer education, and how to begin creating a more critical consumer education. Critical pedagogy emerged in the field of education in the late 1970s as educators began questioning the supposed “neutrality” of education and recognizing the politics inherent in all educational endeavors. In this context, politics pertains to “the operation, exercise, and distribution of power—and the contest or struggle for power—within the social structure; which shapes human life within a society, having consequences for the interests and life possibilities of its members” (Lankshear, 1987, p. 16). Critical pedagogy sought to situate education within its social, political, and economic contexts; this involved asking questions about types of knowledge taught in classrooms, how that knowledge was taught, and how education came to reflect only certain types of knowledge and values. Apple (1990) suggested that educators should not ask, “how does a student most efficiently acquire knowledge,” but rather “why and how particular aspects of the collective culture are presented in school as objective, factual knowledge” (p. 14).

The critical pedagogy movement views education as a form of cultural politics, seeing schooling as involving power relations, social practices and privileged forms of knowledge “that support a specific vision of past, present and future” (McLaren, 1998, p. 164). Education also “reproduce[s] inequality, racism and sexism” and “fragments democratic social relations” by stressing “competitiveness and cultural ethnocentrism” (McLaren, p. 164). Critical pedagogy advocates argue that education often reproduces social inequalities, but they also recognize the transformative power of education and focus on how teachers and learners can work together to challenge the ideological hegemony being promoted in classrooms. Critical pedagogy “engages students and teachers collaboratively in making explicit the socially constructed

character of knowledge, and asking in whose interests particular 'knowledges' are thus constructed" (Lankshear, Peters, & Knobel, 1996, p. 150).

Another arena from which critical consumer education can draw is the field of consumer research, where there is a growing interest in critical perspectives. Murray et al. (1994), for example, have critiqued traditional consumer research and argue for a more "critical" direction for consumer research that goes "beyond cognitive and behavioral issues surrounding acquisition, consumption, disposition, and marketing of consumer goods" (p. 559). Ozanne and Murray (1995) also contend that market researchers, consumer educators, and policymakers have focused on providing consumers with "more complete information and better skills" (p. 516) but they criticize this trend because it "leaves the existing system virtually unquestioned and intact" (p. 516). They propose that consumers should "become more radically critical or reflexively defiant by dropping this natural attitude toward the existing order and, instead, questioning economic, political, and social structures" (p. 516).

Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Consumption

Using ideas from both critical pedagogy and critical consumer research, we can begin asking questions about the taken-for-granted assumptions within traditional consumer education and begin to envision a more critical consumer education. If one examines consumer education through a more critical lens, one sees a very different purpose of consumer education. Whereas in traditional consumer education, consumption refers to the "acquisition, use, and divestment of goods and services" (Denzin, 2001, p. 325), within a critical framework consumption "represents a site where power, ideology, gender, and social class circulate and shape one another" (Denzin, p. 325). Within this framework consumption is viewed as "a social activity that integrates consumers into a specific social system and commits them to a particular social vision. In other words, "consumption

does not stem from the realm of nature... but from the realm of culture" (Ozanne & Murray, 1995, p. 522). From a critical point of view, culture is inherently political—a "terrain of conflict and contestation. It is seen as a key site for the production and reproduction of the social relations of everyday life" (Storey, 1996, pp. 2). From a critical perspective, consumer education can be viewed as a site wherein adults learn about consumption. If consumption is inherently cultural, and culture is inherently political, consumer education can be reframed as a political site wherein learners are taught particular ways of relating to consumer culture and capitalism—where they are constructed to have particular reactions to consumption and consumerism. Important questions for consumer educators, from this framework, are "What kind of consumers are we creating?" and "What kinds of reactions to consumer culture are we seeking to elicit from our learners?"

Within a more critical consumer education, learners not only would learn technical skills, but also would come to challenge the consumer culture within which consumer education and they as consumers operate. Much traditional consumer education operates to craft consumers who believe the consumer world is good and natural. Consumer education that creates this kind of consumer "assumes participation in a consumer culture" (Ozanne & Murray, 1995, p. 521). Consumers who embrace consumption accept "consumption as a way to self development, self-realization, and self-fulfillment" (McGregor, 2001, p. 2). While most traditional consumer education also teaches learners to be critical by examining consumer rights and responsibilities, the "critical" consumers they seek to create are those whose resistance has been incorporated into the economic system. These moments of critical consumer education thus become "appropriated by the dominant system" (Ozanne & Murray, p. 521) because these consumers naturalize consumer culture and thus do all of their critiquing *within* that framework.

A more critical consumer education approach would position learners to question the taken-for-granted hegemony of

consumption and of consumerism. A more informed way of navigating the consumer world and a better method of making consumer decisions would be taught. Critical consumer education would help learners recognize that the "hegemonic cultural logic of consumerism systematically permeates public, discursive, and psychic spaces, dictating that our lived experiences are increasingly shaped and monitored by marketers" (Rumbo, 2002, p. 134). Within critical consumer education, learners would form a "different relationship to the marketplace in which they identify unquestioned assumptions and challenge the status of existing structures as natural" (Ozanne & Murray, 1995, p. 522).

Implications for Consumer Education Practice and Research

In classrooms, critical consumer education would engage learners in activities that explored topics not typically found in consumer education curricula. For instance, learners could learn about fair labor practices and explore global labor conditions for workers who create many consumer goods sold in America. An exploration into sweatshops and fair labor practices could lead to campus and community activism targeting fair labor issues.

Learners also could learn about consumer culture and how corporate-sponsored advertising campaigns work to foster the pro-consumption culture so prevalent in the United States. To explore alternatives, learners could read and discuss magazines and websites such as *Adbusters*, which seek to fight against corporate advertising and consumerism. Learners also could explore anti-consumption social movements such as the "Voluntary Simplicity" movement, and could create action projects centered around how to consume less and live more simply. In addition, they could explore the global, regional, and local environmental effects of consumption, which also could be connected to action research projects.

Likewise, a critical perspective on consumer education widens the terrain of what could be considered consumer education, and thus what researchers could investigate. For instance, social

movements concerned with emerging consumer issues could be viewed as informal sites of consumer education, and thus would open up a new area of research examining approaches and perspectives consumers are learning.

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