Consuming as a Part of Everyday Life: Boundary Crossing between School and Everyday Life - Some Theoretical Remarks

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Consumption and learning exist ambiguously all around us. Consumption is more and more a part of student’s conditions for learning, growing and being socialised. However, it is claimed that consumer education has a rather marginal impact on the consumer behaviour and choices of young people. How to fulfil the aims of schooling: To raise critical consumer consciousness and to empower students, consumers now and in the future, with action competence, relevant also in the changing conditions of the unknown future. Our standpoint is that there is obvious need for reconsidering the visions, pedagogical tools, as well as teaching and learning methods and contents of consumer education at schools. How to develop more open learning environments which better enable interaction with the surrounding societal context? How to empower pupils to become ethically conscious consumers in the future? How to improve transfer of knowledge and skills learned at school to everyday situations outside school?
In this article we discuss some theoretical issues of our new research project. With this discussion we emphasise the need of reforming consumer education. The research project is evolving at the moment, some pilot-studies are done, but due to this early phase of the project, we cannot present any elaborated results here. Our Finnish project is part of the Nordic research project and the possibility to compare Nordic results provides more detailed analysis and gives possibilities for multidimensional interpretations. Jointly planned developmental projects, are conducted later in the primary and secondary school settings as well as in the teacher education departments. These projects open new views for developing teaching and learning methods for educating a conscious and critical consumers in the future world.

Keywords
Consumer education, Socio-cultural approach, Boundary crossing

Introduction

Consuming is a cultural phenomenon which is ambiguously present in the contemporary societies in all Western countries. It is often claimed that young people have consumption patterns which are not sustainable (Hearn & Roseneil 1999). Therefore teaching and learning in the area of consumer education aims to change student’s conceptions of consumption and their personal, moral and ethical values behind those conceptions. However, the contemporary pedagogical means of school as an institution have proven to be weak if, on the other side of coin, lies the strong power of marketing, media and the hard-valued ethos of contemporary work and family life (Saarinen 2001). Society and consumption has become more complex than ever (see Beck 1992). For these reasons the pedagogical visions of consumer education at schools should be reconceptualized both methodologically and theoretically. Here we apply the recent studies of transfer and boundary crossing (Wenger 1998, Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström 2001) for helping us to re-view the future needs of developing consumer education and home economics education.

Questions related to transfer lie at the very heart of the educational system (Greeno 1997, Kivinen & Silvennoinen 1999). Nowadays, schools...
are not able to teach students everything they will need to know, they must rather equip students with the ability to transfer – to use what they have learned to solve new problems successfully or to learn quickly in new situations. This criticism is especially relevant regarding consumer education. We claim that the societal context of consuming has changed far quicker than the pedagogical views of consumer education.

The traditional educational approaches related to consumer education bring about rather homogenous and middle-classed values and moral-related issues about ‘recommendable consumer behaviour’ i.e. the ultimate aims and contents of consumer education. However, the societal context is getting more heterogeneous and diverse, and the issues relating to consuming are of special importance for those students being in a danger to be marginalized in the society. There are several groups such as immigrants, students with different kinds of learning problems who face this incompatibility. Multicultural consumer education is really a challenge for in-service teachers as well as teacher educators. The teacher who is teaching multicultural class is often feeling unsecured. The immigrants are behaving, thinking and believing in other way than the students of the “dominant” culture. What is the relevance of traditional consumer education issues if you are a multicultural student and enter the classes? Does one learn as a multicultural student how to be a full citizen in dominant culture of society? What happens to his/her own culture? Is it possible to understand the other cultures way of life as a consumer?

The content of consumer education needs also critical consideration. In Finland the content is very often seen either as teaching recycling to students, or as teaching them how to make comparison between two different detergents. Now we see consumer education as a way of life, and to be part of our society. In our search of new standpoints on consumers’ decision-making processes, we expand the view from individual decision making to participation in communities of practice, mainly outside school and to the societal, historical and contradictory change of everyday life. Yet, by doing this we face several challenges. How to develop more open learning environments which enable students’ and teachers’ interaction with the surrounding societal realities. How to develop more meaningful learning experiences for students, which help to cross the boundary between everyday life and school? How to raise

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students’ critical consciousness in relation to factors affecting choices and how to help them to become ethically and socially more conscious?

Short history and new challenges of consumer education

In order to outline the history of consumer education, the notions of Steffens (2000) have been benefited here to describe four periods of consumer education in Finland (Figure 1). These four simplified periods represent the evolution of consumer education and development of pedagogical views:

- The times of naive consumption (to the end of 60’s): in the 60s and the 70s Finland had raised up the national economy and the economic well-being of citizens was raising as well. Regarding consumption the problems of poverty were turning into problems of plenty i.e. the availability of goods was increasing and the citizens met ever increasing problems of choice.

- The times of consumerism (to the end of 70’s): as the markets grow, the legislation and societal means developed likewise. The consumer organisations got a stronger position and consumer policy practices developed.

- The times of social and green consumerism (in the 80’s): Expanding possibilities of consuming led to situation that, taken as an example, regarding food people became increasingly alienated from their production. As a counter effect for this, the ‘green consumerism’ began to raise.

- The times of safety-concerns (since the 90’s): Perceived nutritional risks became more complex, including food safety issues and concerns of the ways foods are produced. The ‘green consumerism’ got even stronger position and made consumers more conscious of ethically and sustainability produced items.

These views are described more thoroughly in the following figure.
Figure 1. The evolution of consumer education and development of pedagogical views.
In the beginning, the aims of education were relatively easy to defined. It was generally believed that there exists causal relationships between knowledge and behaviour, and there were likewise, that there are clear curriculum contents to be taught further. As the ethos of scarcity and saving turned slowly to the plurality of food and consuming markets, difficulties of choosing from the plenty, and needs for distancing from the behavioristic paradigm became more apparent. Through the cognitive and constructivistic approaches on school and curricular practices, pedagogy developed also to the more humanistic directions. However, at the same time the background of consuming problems became more complex to comprehend, and this development further raised the need of ethical and value considerations, while having an aim to comprehend consuming in a multifaceted society.

As taking the complexity and features of risk society (Beck 1992) as a standing point, there are even more pedagogical challenges which cannot be solved with old means only; i.e. with adding more knowledge, or assuming a linear relationship between knowledge and behaviour1. But following the lines of Säljö’s (2000) thinking: is school as a system monitoring and following the societal changes? What kind of pedagogic is needed for integrating curriculum with the contemporary (and even future) consuming society? Is it so that individuals, facing the problems of plenty and dilemmatic choices, are still today instructed with guides only explicating recommended and non-recommended features of consumer behaviour?

Problems of the current educational system

The problems and challenges of consumer education are not separate from the problems and possibilities of the current educational system. The news from schools in all Western countries are not too promising. There are more and more problems of violent and un-socialized students,

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1 We have proposed elsewhere that instead of seeing everyday problem-solving as linear process, it should be comprehended as a gap-closing process (Palojoki & Tuomi-Gröhn 2002)
teachers get more and more unmotivated with over-sized classes, the amount of teachers having work-dependent exhaustion problems has sky-rocketed. If both students and teachers feel bad, is there something wrong with the system, and if so, what could be done? Steirnberg (1998, 4) describes American schools with rather dark tones:

“In school, students are expected to learn fragmented bits or chunks of subject matter which seems to be important only as a gateway to more of the same. They move from class to class, in batches of thirty, with few opportunities, except perhaps disruptive behaviour, to distinguish themselves from their peers. They have little respect for teachers, who have been given the impossible job of commanding attention to material that seems lifeless and useless.”

What is wrong with the learning activities at schools? Gardner (1991) argued ten years ago that most high school courses try to cover a broad array of contents and impart a wide array of generalizable skills, but the result is often a disappointment. When the students are asked to apply knowledge learned at school even top students demonstrate only a superficial understanding of key concepts and ideas. It seems that learning activities at school are living on their own ‘code’. This means that in order to survive at schools, the students must learn the code i.e. memorising formulas or learning propositions that they will need to repeat only on tests. As soon as they meet the same concepts in a real-life setting, they revert to their original intuitive theories.

Integration of learning with meaningful activities is one approach to these problems (Säljö 2000). Being a good example of school-subjects which combine practical activities and theoretical challenges, home economics education and consumer education can help students to find meaningful learning tasks which also can help to lower the barrier between school activities and other activities in the surrounding community, in the ‘real life’. One way to integrate school learning and everyday experiences is to organise learning through interventive projects which open up the learning environment to the society life, and help students to analyse their tackling of everyday consuming problems. At best, these projects open up possibilities for expansive learning and development.
Reconceptualising transfer as one solution to these problems

Conceptualisation of transfer lies at heart while trying to overcome the barrier between school and life outside it. Cognitive notions on transfer are based on the idea that knowledge is transferred from the solution of one task to the solution of another task (Mayer & Wittrock, 1996, 48). The problem solver is seen as an active participant of the problem-solving process, as one who must manage the way the prior knowledge is used to solve a new problem (Mayer & Wittrock, 1996, 50). This kind of view on transfer has been prevalent also quite common regarding home economics education and consumer issues.

Also within the cognitive perspective there has been substantial criticism to this static view of the problem situation. Brandsford, Brown and Cocking (1999) argue that most cognitive transfer research is based on ‘sequestered problem solving’, which means that there are no opportunities for seeking help for other actor or resources, or revise the solution based on feedback. This direct application theory of learning has created much of the pessimism about evidence for transfer (Brandsford et al., 1999). While solving everyday consuming problems, one does not act in isolation. Rather, regarding that the consuming decisions are often made as a joint effort, considering the opinions of the friends or other family members.

Consuming decisions are also strongly situated i.e. making food choices FOR family members, not solving isolated best-buy-problems. Learning and knowing are processes of participation and apprenticeship in communities of practice. Here we can think households or groups of youngsters as kind of communities of practices\(^2\) i.e. having the contextually specified way of thinking, acting and solving problems. The important notion in a situated view of transfer is that what is transferred is not knowledge from task to task but patterns of participatory processes

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\(^2\) See Wenger (1998) for more about conceptualizing communities of practice.
across situations (Greeno, 1997, p.12). The situated view of transfer switches the locus of learning from an individual to a novice participating in a community of practice i.e. child or student learning to survive in the contemporary jungle on consuming society. In so doing so, the situated view also expands the structures of knowledge to include not just mental and symbolic representations but also physical artefacts and recurring patterns of social practice. By acknowledging this, we do need to reconsider the locus of teaching consumer issues from learning facts and behaviour patterns, to the critical analysis of both social and societal practices.

Drawing on the socio-culturally oriented theories, Beach (1999) has paid attention to the dynamic nature of the social situations. For Beach, most current notions of transfer presuppose that tasks or situations across which transfer occurs are unchanging. Hence the process of creating tasks is excluded from being considered as part of the transfer process. From these standpoints we raise the reasoning of our interventive tasks and projects being conducted at schools. According to our view, school practices and tasks done, or problems solved in real everyday situations must have a closer connection. The over-emphasis of the role of individual learner, excludes from the transfer process humans involved in the construction of tasks or the collectively and historically linking background of situations. It is possible to design tasks and boundary crossing places that have the possibility to facilitate transfer and learning between the school and everyday life (compare Lambert 2002).

Boundary-zone activity is a concept which defines a new kind of collaboration between school and work (Konkola 2000). In this connection, boundary-zone is defined as a place where each one involved is reflecting their own structures, attitudes, beliefs, norms, and roles. In the studies of Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2001, 2002) and Konkola (20012000), this boundary-zone activity was created and used as a theoretical tool for understanding learning between school and work. These same theoretical tools are applied here while crossing

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3 Jointly planned developmental projects, are conducted later in the primary and secondary school settings as well as in the teacher education departments.
between school and everyday life on young students. What characterizes boundary-zone activity, when the issue is everyday life and consuming, what kind of learning and development one can see embedded in these activities. What kind of boundaries do the multicultural students cross and how they manage to do this?

**Our future research: aims and methods**

Previously Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2002) have emphasised the importance of boundary crossing between different organisations from the viewpoint of creating new activities and innovative solutions. In these studies, the multi-voiced collaboration between vocational education and work has proven to be a powerful way of solving real life problems, where new types of activities can emerge. Regarding this project focusing on consumer issues, we now concentrate on the same problems, but focus on crossing the boundary between school and everyday life. This expansion of the field of studies creates possibilities to develop formative experiments which facilitate and promote brokering and networking between school and consuming as an activity of students.

In this project, started in 2001, the aim is to join Finnish, Swedish and Danish experiences of consuming and develop joint pedagogical tools, which acknowledge the socio-cultural context in which the pupils are living their everyday life. The aims of the research project are:

a) to explain and to understand the contemporary consuming culture and its impact on young adults’ consuming activities,

b) to create developmental projects aiming to boundary crossing between school and everyday consuming life of the students.

The socio-cultural school of thought is our shared background both theoretically and empirically (e.g. Vygotsky 1978, Lave 1988, Wenger 1998, Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, we apply the recent results regarding boundary crossing and conceptualizations of developmental transfer (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström 2001, 2002). This shared background provides new tools for comprehending the features of consuming as a phenomenon as socio-culturally determined, yet, being changeable by activities of active citizens. The aims of the research
project are a) to explain and to understand the contemporary consuming culture and its impact on young adults’ consuming activities, b) to create developmental projects aiming to boundary crossing between school and everyday consuming life of the students.

The methodological emphasis of this research project is on the boundary crossing problems and the possibilities of boundary zones between different organizations as a fruitful and innovative place for creation of new knowledge and new practices. Data will be collected by ethnographic studies of students’s everyday life and activities. Versatile qualitative data will be collected in order to outline an ecologically valid picture of contemporary consumption of young people. Based on this data interventive and experimental sessions are created to be used in the school context. In these sessions real-world critical incidents and examples from the ethnographic material are brought upon in order to stimulate student’s analysis of their everyday activities.

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