

The Consumer Looks at the Secondary Educational Program

Herbert A. Tonne, Professor of Business
New York University

In an indirect sense schools have always been interested in the further education of the consumer. In a direct sense most school work has been devoted to the training of the producer; that is, school work has been vocational education. In the last half of the nineteenth century with the introduction of various forms of home economics, the consumer as an individual became recognized more specifically. By 1910 various people were becoming conscious of the large amount of waste in spending and of the need for a broader base of planning by the consumer in order to find his proper place in the economic system.

Beginnings of Consumer Education

The real beginning of consumer education is to be found in Henry Harap's monumental study of the possibilities of consumer education. In his younger days, Henry Harap envisaged a complete curriculum built around the consumer. This dream has not become an actuality. In many ways it is unfortunate that we have not been able to develop a completely consumer oriented secondary curriculum. It would have eliminated a great deal of the tradition that still encumbers our teaching. It would have effectively focused attention upon the student as the center of interest in teaching and away from the teacher as a giver of information. In spite of the fact that Henry Harap's dream did not come true, it has had tremendous effect. The consumer muckrakers, if we may use that term, who wrote highly colorful and distorted pictures of the abuses of the consumer in the late 1920s and early 1930s had a powerful effect upon the organization of consumer courses. Though these writers did exaggerate and distort, they undoubtedly did give the American public a tremendous good. Through their various exaggerations they pointed out the evils that are perpetrated upon the American consumer in large measure because of his ignorance. These books and lectures supplied the foundation for the development of specific courses in consumer education. Unfortunately, in the middle '30s these courses were largely critical of our economic system and negative in their influence. They showed what was wrong with the materials bought by the consumer, rather than emphasize the way in which the consumer could select more intelligently. However, the materials offered to the consumer by the Department of Agriculture through its Consumers Guide, by the Consumer's Union, and by Consumer's Research gradually did a great deal to achieve a balance.

Developments up to World War II

By 1940 consumer education courses had become quite well balanced. These courses had become spread over many departmental areas such as science, social studies, economics, business education and the like. They had permeated the college, the secondary school and the elementary school. Though for the most part they were still rather critical of the economic system as an instrument for supplying the consumer, they recognized the need on the part of the consumer for considerable intelligence in the purchase of his good as the best way to improve consumption. Thus while there was widespread duplication and confusion as to what should be taught (whether the school should emphasize the development of proper philosophical attitudes, or whether the attention should be upon specific consumer information), nevertheless, very real progress had been made.

Effect of World War on Consumer Education

Unfortunately, World War II was a serious detriment for the development of a further program in consumer education. Many courses were necessarily cut out of the program and that meant that the newest and least populated courses in many cases went first. The emphasis was rightly upon winning a war and therefore school work was streamlined. For most administrations streamlining meant going back for the most part to the traditional courses and accepting only those newer courses which specifically helped in the war effort.

When the war was over there was some attempt at the resurrection of programs of consumer education. By this time however, the idea of education of the consumer had permeated the entire curriculum. Almost every course, consciously and unconsciously, that was offered was slanted toward the idea of consumer education. Moreover the concept of the life adjustment program was in large measure little more than a re-statement in somewhat different orientation of the program of consumer education. Courses in economics, book-keeping, general business, home economics, science, social studies and the like are taught from a considerably different point of view than they had been in the 1930s. The teachers recognized that theoretical, formalized learning is not effective. They have found that if learning is to be effective, it must be taught in terms of the immediate interests of the students which in practice are largely consumer oriented rather than concerned with abstract culture.

As the consumer looks upon the secondary school program of the late 1950s he can find much to discourage him and much to encourage him. There are values on both sides of the balance sheet.

Liabilities in Consumer Education

Courses in science still tend to deal with theoretical science. Courses in the social studies still deal with history, as such, in most cases. Courses in English still are concerned with the theory of English; with a largely non-existent grammar rather than with the ability to communicate intelligently. Courses in business still are concerned with words-a-minute in typing and shorthand and with the transfer of figures from a journal to a ledger, for example. Courses in vocational education still tend to deal with training for the job as it was a generation ago, and even courses in home economics tend to be over-theoretical. Many children can and do go through their entire school program without being given a really effective and enthusiastic orientation towards the problem of consumption by a teacher who is enthusiastically aware of the problem of improving the lot of the consumer.

Assets in Consumer Education

On the positive side there have been many gains. Teachers now try to motivate, in many cases at least, in terms of the natural, that is the consumer, interests of the student. Many courses offered by many teachers emphasize the point of view of the consumer. Courses in home economics have been especially effective in taking the point of view of the consumer. Unfortunately courses in home economics still are not given or at least are not taken by boys. While much of the teaching of the social studies is still centered around the teaching of history, many teachers have gone far in recognizing that social studies instruction must be something more than the development of historical mindedness. Even science and mathematics in spite of the most recent trend caused by the dire shortage of mathematicians and scientists still tend to have much awareness of the functional usage of mathematics and science in the home and in the personal life of the individual. Many other specific examples could of course be offered and are recognizable by all of us.

The Next Necessary Step

Probably the single most severe loss has been the rather considerable reduction in specific courses in consumer education. While the integration of the concept of consumer education into all courses has been a positive good, the loss of specific courses in consumer education has been a serious setback for consumer education. Students need a specific unit of considerable strength, time and emphasis concerned with themselves as consumers and concerned with their effect upon the total consumption process. It is sincerely to be hoped that there will be a strong revival of courses in consumer education in the secondary schools and on the college level.

However, the mere offering of such courses will in itself not be very effective. Such courses must be well organized, must have a serious body of subject matter and must be strongly motivated so that students will believe in the work that they are doing. Of course, most important, the teacher must not only be competent in the field of consumer education, but thoroughly enthusiastic about the work he is doing. Improved consumption is still the single best key to a better economic system. To leave such an important segment of learning to marginal learning is unfortunate. It should be the core around which a rich body of subject matter is built.