

On Taking a Values-focused Approach to the Teaching of Consumer Economics

This paper argues for the teaching about values in consumer economics courses. It suggests that when an instructor teaches consumer economics it is likely that such teaching reflects the dominant economic arrangement of the country where the course is taught, that the instructor brings to the analysis his/her own set of intellectual biases (including economic ideology and political attitudes), and that the teaching is from the viewpoint of the consumer interest. Consumer economics instructors are challenged to consider methods by which values may be taught.

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Introduction

Interest in the topic of "values" has grown in recent years. Speeches of President Bill Clinton, even during the days of the 1992 campaign, regularly have emphasized the responsibilities of Americans. Another indicator is the success of William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues*, which has remained on the bestseller lists for many months.⁴ Since the 1994 election, the Republican dominated Congress has raised on a weekly basis challenging questions about society's values on such issues as welfare, food stamps, affirmative action, and government responsibility. Commentators on television talk shows are frequently heard to say that, "Young people lack proper values."

Most would agree that values are becoming increasingly important in today's society. What to do about values, especially when considering the teaching about values, remains a difficult and, as yet, unmet challenge. Most instructors avoid teaching about values because of their fear when someone asks the question, "Whose values?" Yet, if the instructors in today's schools do not teach about values to students, where will students learn to recognize their own values? And, where will students learn to be good citizens?

Consumer economics instructors are not immune from the discussion of values because much of the traditional content in the field directly deals with the underlying economic and social traditions and beliefs of a society as well as the values of individual consumers. To illustrate, consider the following list of examples of the topics typically examined in a consumer economics course: the consumer interest, consumer sovereignty, seller-consumer conflicts, rights and responsibilities,

ripoffs and frauds in the economic marketplace, capitalism versus socialism, social and economic goals of society, allocating resources in society, competition, market economy, benefit-cost analysis, world economic problems, international codes of proper corporate behavior, planned buying, pro-environmental consumption, and consumer decision making. These consumer economics topics are ripe with values.

As the most basic underlying force in decisions and actions, values must be acknowledged and understood. Gross, Crandall and Knoll (1980, p. 78) write that, "a value is always important to the person who holds it, it is desirable and satisfying, and it tends to endure." Consumer economics instructors need to teach students about values and help them identify those which influence the ideologies of people in business, government, labor and the consumer movement. In support of teaching consumer economics with an emphasis on responsibilities, Crawford, Lawrence and Prawitz (1995, p. 97) state that, "Consumer educators might stress not only [consumer] rights and responsibilities, but that acceptance implies ethics and morality."

What Values Are Currently Being Taught in Consumer Economics?

When an instructor teaches consumer economics three things are probably true: (1) it is likely that such teaching reflects the dominant economic arrangement of the country where the course is taught, (2) that the instructor brings to the analysis his/her own set of

intellectual biases (including economic ideology and political attitudes), and (3) that the teaching is from the viewpoint of the consumer interest.

Values Reflected in the Economic Arrangement of a Country

The values emphasized in consumer economics are likely to reflect the dominant culture and economic arrangement of the country where the course is taught, such as socialism and capitalism. This occurs because the dominant economic arrangement is the status quo and instructors are expected to communicate such to their students.

When teaching consumer economics, there are a number of status quo normative values that are likely to be promoted by instructors who support the culture and economic arrangement of the country where the course is taught. A list for those teaching consumer economics and promoting the values of U.S. styled capitalism includes: political democracy, economic freedom, economic efficiency, full employment, economic productivity, price stability, economic prosperity, economic security, and economic justice. Teaching consumer economics in countries other than the United States might, of course, change the list somewhat.

Values Based Upon the Intellectual Biases of the Instructor

Consumer economics instructors bring their own set of intellectual biases, sometimes disguised as values or beliefs, to the subject of consumer economics. Depending upon the subject matter, the instructor typically brings his or her own intuitive socio-political perspective to the content of a specific course.⁵ This perspective generally includes one's political views as well as his or her economic ideology. "An ideology is a coherent, systematic, and moving statement of basic values and purpose" (Cavanagh, 1990).

Courses in consumer economics are often taught by instructors who subscribe to one of the two broad ideological perspectives that dominate political thinking in the United States: conservatism and liberalism. "Supporters of conservatism believe in limited government, except in national defense, and have faith in encouraging personal achievement. The two cardinal beliefs of conservatives are private-property rights and free enterprise. Conservatives embrace self-help, empowerment, free markets, and decentralized individual choice (except for abortion rights)" (Garman, p. 348).

Liberals believe that government can and should play a vital and positive role in the alleviation of society's problems. "Liberalism involves a belief that government should be used to bring about justice and equality of

opportunity. The word 'liberal' is translated from Greek as 'a free man' as opposed to a slave. It implies freedom of thought, freedom from conventional beliefs, and the right of others to think differently than oneself" (Garman, p. 349).

In years past the ideals of conservatives and liberals in American politics did not differ much. For decades, both conservatives and liberals generally went along with each other's programs and proposals largely to continue the status quo and to get re-elected. However, the election of 1994 has greatly widened the ideological gap between conservatives and liberals. Some suggest that this is a reflection of the fact that "...Americans no longer share a firm commitment to traditional norms and values" (Larson, p. A7). Himmelfarb (1995) argues that society has lost its sense of moral consensus.

Consumer economics instructors also are likely to subscribe to one of the dominant economic ideological belief systems: neoclassical, managerial, or reformist. Each has its own set of beliefs about the structure of an economy, how companies in the economy behave, and the effects of that behavior on consumers. Neoclassicists are strong believers in the free enterprise system and favor market mechanisms over government intervention. Managerialists emphasize the role of the professional corporate manager who is trusted to make decisions in the interest of workers, shareholders and consumers. Reformists believe the economy is dominated by shared monopolies and willingly use government to achieve fairness in the marketplace (Garman, p. 344-348). Moreover, instructors who teach consumer economics may do so from the perspectives of a major political ideology and of a dominant economic belief system.

Values Based on the Consumer Interest

Though most introductory economics textbooks devote little or no attention to normative economics, i.e., how the world ought to work, this is not true of textbooks in consumer economics. Hausman (1989, pp. 122-123) argues that, "normative concerns are central to economic methodology...and that the normative role of methodology is unavoidable." There is no doubt that both economics and consumer economics offer insight into questions of social and individual values. Consumer economics, in particular, with its focus on the role of the individual in decision making, is predominately concerned with the interests of consumers. Therefore, the values emphasized in consumer economics should be based on the consumer interest.

Normative public policies that should be examined by those teaching consumer economics are those that promote the consumer interest. The "consumer interest is defined as concerned with securing, protecting,

and asserting consumer rights primarily in marketplace transactions in order that consumers receive an acceptable quality of goods and services at fair or low prices" (Garman, p. 18). Thus, consumer interest concerns are primarily about questions of personally obtaining value for money and seeking equity for all consumers.

The "What" and the "How" of Teaching About Values Needs More Attention

A suggested list of values that might be examined when teaching consumer economics classes includes: honesty, trust, loyalty, goodwill, civility, dignity, opportunity, rights, justice, fairness, equity, decency, tradition, stability, individuality, conformity, change, practicality, economy, saving, education, investment, self gratification, social prestige, equality, choice, tolerance, personal responsibility, honor, financial success, and financial security. It also can be argued that most of the above named values are some of the fundamental values of civilized society.⁶

The definition of a field of study typically establishes the beginnings of a conceptual framework of the content of that field. No matter which popular definition is used, instruction in consumer economics focuses tightly upon some of the key roles of consumers in society—consuming, utilizing, borrowing, saving, and investing—roles laden with values with a strong bias toward the interest of consumers. The conceptual framework implied in an examination of various consumer roles leads to the content of the field being further developed and refined by instructors, educational institutions, textbook authors, professional associations, and accrediting organizations. This continues to occur in the field of consumer economics, and the idea of values needs more explicit attention.

Neoclassical economics, the dominant school of economic thought, is founded on the idea of "economic man"—individual producers and consumers who behave predictably because they make calculated decisions according to their consciously developed "objective function," which is to maximize profits or utility, respectively. Critics assert that the modernist paradigm of the economic man is lacking, and perhaps fatally flawed, because it lacks a normative perspective. For example, should the focus of consumer economics be utility maximization by consumers or egalitarian motives, communal values, and environmental stewardship? Others suggest that economic analysis needs to focus on institutions and culture, not just individuals. Feminist insights suggest that self-interest is not the only motive

people use in making decisions about things like family size and labor market choices (McCloskey, 1983).

To further explore the challenge for instructors interested in a more values-focused approach to teaching consumer economics, a question must be posed, "When teaching consumer economics, what values should be given full consideration as students examine their roles in life as people who can influence public policy decisions?"

As suggested here, the teaching about values can be done without a moral bias. The teaching of moral and ethical decision making requires adoption of some criteria, typically stated in hierarchical manner, that establishes a decision making matrix.

Those interested in a values-based approach to consumer economics have a need for a conceptual framework of the subject that: (1) identifies more fully the values inherent in the subject matter of consumer economics, (2) specifies the relevant content of consumer economics where such values may be examined, and (3) provides examples of instructional techniques used to teach about values.

Some classroom methods for teaching about values in consumer economics include: (1) facilitating a student generated list of values, (2) encouraging a student debate about these values, (3) asking students to describe typical consumer situations that reflect each value listed, (4) presenting scenarios to students who are asked to identify the underlying values reflected, and (5) asking students to think up situations that demonstrate different values practiced by consumers and businesses.

Moreover, "the academic field of consumer economics utilizes economics concepts and principles along with normative analysis as it makes value judgments about the formulation and evaluation of public policies from the viewpoint of the consumer interest" (Garman, p. 28). This suggests that proper study in the field of consumer economics can add a greater understanding of values to student understanding. When instructed in this manner, students taking consumer economics courses will know why they are studying the consumer interest, the values practiced in their economic system, the ethical heritage of their society, and how to pursue their consumer interests both individually and collectively for the rest of their lives. Consumer economics instructors are encouraged to further explore identification of the values that should be taught in consumer economics and how to effectively go about teaching the subject using a values-focused approach.

Consumer economics instructors who take a values-focused approach to their subject are those who make an intellectual choice to teach others to try and create a better world. Perhaps those instructors share the

belief that an educated and informed American public that pays attention to issues that genuinely affect the consumer interest will exercise their economic and political voting power. Such thoughtful citizen-consumers have the potential to become the most powerful and effective force ever to promote the common good of all consumers.

6. A useful reading that supports the teaching about values in education is Raspberry, W. (1994, February 14). Teaching ethical behavior, Liberal Opinion Week.

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Endnotes

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4. Bennett's ten virtues include responsibility, self-discipline, compassion, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and faith.
5. A useful article on this subject is Hausman, D. M. & McPherson, M. S. (1993, June). Taking ethics seriously: Economics and contemporary moral philosophy. Journal of Economic Literature, pp. 31(2), 671-731.