

Schrum, L. (2002). Education and commercialization: Raising awareness and making wise decisions. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* [Online serial], 2(2), 170-177.

Education and Commercialization: Raising Awareness and Making Wise Decisions

LYNNE SCHRUM

The University of Georgia

We are living in a world of commercialization—everything has a price tag and conspicuous consumption appears to be the way of the western world. The media and politicians remind us that our educational system must prepare our students to be competitive in a global economy. To discuss commercialization in education, we must place it in the current social and economic context. "...The organization of the school, as it is presently constructed, institutionalizes consumer materialism" (Boyles, 1998, p. 4). One result has been a growth in the number and types of partnerships between schools and corporations. We may disagree whether this is the way things should be, but it is the way they currently are, and this presents a challenging conundrum for educators.

This article explores issues regarding commercialization and education. First, it examines the status of commercialization in the K-12 environment. The article then provides a look at reciprocal business and education partnerships, which represent a different type of relationship. Finally, it offers suggestions for dealing with this situation in colleges of education as well as in the K-12 environment.

CURRENT STATUS

Two significant trends have converged to influence the commercialization of education. The first comes from the perceived reduction in funding for

educational institutions in a time of rising costs—or perhaps rising expectation. Schools are being told to find their own funding and reduced resources have led administrators to become fund raisers.

The second trend has more to do with the nature of marketing in America. Young people have large discretionary funds to spend, and they directly influence spending by others. As it has become more difficult to target young audiences (due to more cable channels, video games, and programming on demand), schools have become attractive as an avenue to this largess.

Furthermore, by coupling marketing practices with the promise of advancing teaching goals (such as encouraging literacy or providing direct support for school programs), marketers become important partners in American education. In turn, the schools become partners in the increasing commercialization of American youth. (Wartella, 1995, p. 451)

In public K-12 education, the situation is pervasive. Many individuals and groups raised questions regarding the effects and ethics of using “captive public school audiences to advertise products in return for schools receiving money or equipment” (McCarthy, 1995, p. 5), even before Chris Whittle introduced Channel One. John McLaughlin (1994) concluded that this is not a passing fad, and he was correct. He declared that the relationship between public education and private companies “is more than school-business partnerships; it is a manifestation of the new alignment of the American economy” (p. 5).

A recent study by the U. S. General Accounting Office (GAO) looked extensively at commercial activities in our schools (GAO, 2000). They found that, while advertising was expected to be found on soda pop machines and scoreboards, in actuality advertising was all over the schools they visited, for example, on computers, electronic message boards, and school buses. The GAO classified school commercialization into four categories:

- Product sales—direct sales that benefit a school, cash or credit rebates, and fundraising activities;
- Direct advertising—ads in schools, facilities and buses; ads in school publications; media-based advertising, free samples (snack food or personal hygiene products);

- Indirect advertising—corporate-sponsored educational materials, corporate-sponsored teacher training, corporate-sponsored contests, corporate gifts or grants; and
- Market research—surveys or polls, internet panels, internet tracking.

This situation has gone far beyond the old “labels for computers” programs, which has had its own problems and critics. Although the use of corporation-sponsored curriculum materials can be traced back to 1890 (GAO, 2000, p. 5), they began as relatively innocuous products. Now companies are driving curriculum in many ways, and most of them are done in the name of “partnerships” or through free curricula. This is not meant to imply that all partnerships are meant to exploit, as will be discussed later in this article, and many examples can be found of companies selflessly giving time and money to solve schools’ real problems. But consider these examples:

- Eli Lilly representatives discuss Prozac to high school students in Washington, DC;
- Proctor & Gamble sponsors oral hygiene classes in elementary school in return for distributing samples of Crest;
- The National Soft Drink Association provides a poster titled, “Soft Drinks and Nutrition”;
- the M&M Mars candy company declares nutritional value in their products; and
- A recent math book, *Mathematics: Applications and Connections* (McGraw-Hill), currently in use by sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students in at least 16 US states, inserts products as Barbie dolls, Big Macs, and Oreo cookies right into math problems. For example, “Will is saving his allowance to buy a pair of Nike shoes that cost \$68.25. If Will earns \$3.25 per week, how many weeks will Will need to save?” (Grierson, 1999; Kaplan, 1996; Molnar, 1996).

If these examples were not alarming enough, new companies exist to create curricular activities based on client companies’ products. These materials may be lesson plans, posters, or videos, but they share a goal: to put the sponsor’s message in front of students, and to do it disguised as pure

education. Consumers Union collected and evaluated examples of these materials and found that 80 % contained biased or incomplete information. Further, over half the materials were found to be commercial or highly commercial (Center for Commercial-Free Public Education, 1998).

RECIPROCAL PARTNERSHIPS

It is important to clarify that many excellent relationships exist between individual schools or districts, and corporations, small businesses, communities, or individuals. Individual schools have built sustained and successful partnerships that have endured over many years. School districts have been able to expand the possibilities for their students in myriad ways. And it should be noted that true partnerships go far beyond a company putting its logo on school buses or offering support by underwriting a page of advertisement in the school yearbook. Most of the successful partnerships have one common underlying characteristic: reciprocity. That is, the two entities come together in an equitable relationship, with substantial commitment and benefits identified for both (Parravano, 2001).

An experienced educator turned business executive, who established a successful 10 year program with districts in areas where his company was located, explained that businesses can support schools in many ways. He saw his role and that of his company as an advocate, researcher, anchor, coach, and broker (Parravano, 2001). However, good relationships do not happen by accident. Another experienced educator suggested some guidelines for effective partnerships. First, both parties must commit to a long-term relationship. What may justifiably begin with some skepticism on both sides can turn out to be beneficial for all participants, once all stakeholders make a commitment. On the school side that means teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards. For the business, it should include top level executives. Goals must be set that match both entities' priorities. Additionally, time must be built in for planning, and goals, projects and timelines should be put in writing. Finally, little successes should be celebrated and publicized widely (You, 2001).

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

It is relatively easy to identify problems in our society, however, doing something positive about these problems is much more difficult. The implications are enormous, for future teachers as well as for our current K-12 community. Future educators are currently buffeted by the prevailing winds of commercialism and calls for improvement from political and business commentary. Further, demands are being made for individuals to enter the education profession with improved techniques and skills, rather than improved and innovative pedagogy based upon praxis and reflection. Meanwhile, colleges of education are struggling to meet state certification requirements, increase “credit hour production, and to satisfy students’ demands for getting their money’s worth, getting an ‘A’ or earn merit pay for additional credits” (Boyles, 1998). At the same time, colleges of education face challenges by the proliferation of commercial postgraduate educational opportunities, given the availability and user-friendliness of electronic networks and regional for-profit universities.

As future teachers spend more time in practical experience in schools, they witness the increased commercialization of the curriculum. Unless their methods classes address this issue, they will have little knowledge about the influences and challenges they will face in their own classrooms or of the potential impact or power these educational materials pose. In one example, corporations have encouraged challenges to scientific evidence in the school science curricula by supplying “educational materials that promote clear-cutting of forests while casting doubt on phenomena such as global warming and ozone depletion” (Beder, 1998).

Commercialization, in addition to impacting the K-12 curriculum, also can be found within colleges of education. An argument can be made that preservice educators are in classes by their own volition, and that they are adults, as opposed to K-12 students who are in class by law. However, the same objections to commercialization can be made for the colleges of education. Companies that provide free software are obviously hoping that educators will choose to purchase that with which they are familiar. Posters and other materials that are given to preservice teachers or hang on the walls are intended to sway future decisions, and additionally, they can serve to customize individuals to commercial products in classrooms. Of course, these examples can be found throughout the university, however, other professionals will not be in the position to make decisions that have significant influence on young learners.

CONCLUSION

The situation that we find ourselves in is not new, but should we be concerned about these situations? Bennis (1990) observed, “America has always been at war with itself. We have always dreamt of community and democracy but always practiced individualism and capitalism” (p. 102). It is not enough to recognize the dilemma, when our children are at stake, for it will take a loud and constant voice to change the way this trend is growing exponentially.

What can be done? The GAO (2000) found that individual school districts are setting their own standards, and that they vary widely, and that no one source exists that describes policies around the country. Individuals have had some success in calling school boards’ attention to decisions that have implications of commercialization, but it is an uncertain and slow manner in which to influence change. One step was taken in September, 1999, when Representative George Miller introduced a bill to ban the collection of any information in school from any student under 18 for commercial purposes without first getting written permission from parents.

Colleges of education could make a strong statement by encouraging a dialogue about the circumstances of commercialization, by promoting positive and reciprocal partnerships, and by including some of the following suggestions:

- Encourage examination of curriculum from multiple perspectives, including biases presented or voices not represented. This might take the form of assuming others’ roles, investigating events through primary documents, and challenging statements that appear to favor the perspective of the materials’ developer.
- Create rubrics for acceptance of “free” materials. The process for developing this could be a useful activity for groups and would also heighten the awareness of the larger educational community.
- Teach search and evaluation skills in preservice education, and reintroduce information literacy into K-12 curriculum. With the easy availability of an abundance of information, especially on the WWW, it is extremely important to create cautious and skeptical consumers of all information.

- Engage all stakeholders in this discussion, including parents, policy makers, and students themselves in the K-12 schools, and professors, preservice educators, and administrators in colleges of education. Decisions that are made collaboratively will have some logic and standards that everyone has agreed upon, rather than decisions being made by one person in a cavalier manner.

The seriousness of this issue is clear. Kozol declared, “When business enters education...it sells something more important than the brand names of its products. It sells a way of looking at the world and at oneself” (1992, p. 277). As a society, we must decide if we wish our children to grow up believing commercialism is a normal way of life, or if we can encourage our students to think in other directions. Put another way, do we want public schools to be promoting concern for the public good, or for materialistic attitudes (McCarthy, 1995)?

References

- Beder, S. (1998). The corporate infiltration of science education. *School Science Review*, 80(290). [Online]. Available: <http://www.ase.org.uk/publish/jnews/ssr/bedersep98.html>
- Bennis, W. (1990). *Why leaders can't lead: The unconscious conspiracy continues*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Boyles, D. (1998). *American education and corporations: The free market goes to school*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Center for commercial-free public education. (1999). [Online]. Available: <http://www.comercialfree.org>
- Grierson, B. (Summer, 1999). Brand names in textbooks. *Adbusters*, 1999, p. 33. [Online]. Available: <http://adbusters.org/campaigns/commercial-free/toolbox/textbooks.html>
- General Accounting Office. (2000). *Public education: Commercial activities in school* (GAO/HEHS-00-156). Washington, DC: Author.
- Kaplan, G.R. (1996). Profits r us: Notes on the commercialization of America's schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78(3), pK1-K12.
- Kozol, J. (1992). *Whittle and the privateers: Children in America's schools*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- McCarthy, M.M. (1995). Private investment in public education: Boon or boondoggle? *Journal of School Leadership*, 5(1), 4-21.
- McLaughlin, J. (1994). Privatization trend likely to continue. *School Board News* (June 7), 4-5.

- Molnar, A. (1996). *Giving kids the business: The commercialization of America's schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Parravano, C. (2001). The school-business partnership: What can it offer? *Eisenhower National Clearinghouse Focus*, 8(1), 14-16.
- Wartella, E. (1995). The commercialization of youth: Channel One in context. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(5), 448-451.
- You, A. (2001). Guidelines for effective partnerships. *Eisenhower National Clearinghouse Focus*, 8(1), 18-19.

Web Sites for further information:

- Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education (CACE)
<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CACE>
- BadAds
<http://badads.org>
- Center for Commercial-Free Public Education
<http://www.commercialfree.org/>
- The Media Literacy Online Project
<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/HomePage>
- The Just Think Foundation
<http://www.justthink.org/>
- Dissect an Ad
<http://www.pbs.org/pov/ad/>
- American Academy of Pediatrics: Children, Adolescents and Advertising
<http://www.aap.org/policy/00656.html>
- Consumer Reports Center for Children, Youth, and Families
<http://www.zillions.org>

Contact Information:

Lynne Schrum
Department of Instructional Technology
604 Aderhold Hall
University of Georgia
Athens, GA USA
lschrum@coe.uga.edu