

EDUCATION AND THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

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Summary

In the broadest context, all of human experience is education. Self-reflection and inquiry inform about oneself; contacts with family, peers, and media impart attitudes, skills, knowledge, and ways of being as effectively as any formal education. In considering the relationship between education and consumption, the most significant question is whether education develops only the ability to discriminate between offered alternatives or whether it builds the capacity to think of new alternatives. The former includes choosing a better performing product or one with less impact on the environment, while the latter includes evaluating the desire to be satisfied and whether it is appropriate to do so. This fundamental choice is a theme throughout this article, from the values that motivate actions to indicators that reveal their consequences.

Education can help individuals understand that they are more than consumers or it can make them more discriminating consumers, with increasing desires for more novel goods and services. Consumption of food, water, and the other necessities to sustain a healthy and fulfilling life is a basic human need. If consuming becomes a way of life, pursued for its own sake or the status it brings, it can lead to hollow experiences of relating to the self and others primarily through material possessions. More, different, and better experiences are continually required to satisfy increasing needs and immediate personal gratification.

Humans are spiritual beings with a self-referenced worth independent of either external evaluations or what they consume. Until this is acknowledged, and internalized into basic assumptions about human lives, relationships, and civilization, attempts to increase well-being through consumption will continue. Recent studies reveal that affluence, and consumption without compensating factors such as community involvement and close relationships, correlates to personal depression.

As an increasing global population develops and intensifies its resource use, using the same consumption patterns that developed countries have to date could cause breakdown of the life-support systems that sustain humanity. Only education that informs of the consequences of choices, and builds the capacity to choose differently, will avoid this inevitable reckoning.

A major issue of the twenty-first century will be the extent to which the values that motivate some people limiting consumption and seeking sustainability are adopted by a broader base of humanity. Will humanity accept the evolutionary mandate, or will individuals be primarily consumers in advanced technological society, collectively moving towards the limits of the planet to sustain life as humanity knows it?

1. Introduction

In the broadest context, all of human experience is education. Self-reflection and inquiry inform about oneself; contacts with family, peers, and media impart attitudes, skills, knowledge, and ways of being as effectively as any formal education. In considering the relationship between education and consumption, the most significant question is whether education develops only the ability to discriminate among offered alternatives or builds the capacity to think of new alternatives. The former includes choosing a better performing product or one with less impact on the environment, while the latter includes evaluating the desire to be satisfied and whether it is appropriate to do so. This fundamental choice is a theme throughout this article, from the values that motivate actions to indicators that reveal their consequences.

Education offers a wide range of potential outcomes, from enabling individuals to define freely a place in society and constructively fulfill it, to developing the ability to operate contrary to any definition of a sustainable future. Education can help individuals understand that they are more than consumers or it can make them more discriminating consumers, with increasing desires for more novel goods and services. This range of potential outcomes requires that the purposes of education be clearly defined and supported by a broad base of human civilization.

Consumption of food, water, and the other necessities to sustain a healthy and fulfilling life is a basic human need. Consuming a good meal in the company of loved ones brings pleasure. If consuming becomes a way of life, pursued for its own sake or the status it brings, it can lead to hollow experiences of relating to the self and others primarily through material possessions. More, different, and better experiences are continually required to satisfy increasing needs and immediate personal gratification. If the definition of one's self is derived from the reflected opinion of others or material possessions, it lacks depth of meaning.

Humans are spiritual beings with a self-referenced worth independent of either external evaluations or what they consume. Until this is acknowledged, and internalized into the basic assumptions about human lives, relationships, and civilization, attempts to increase well-being through consumption will continue. Recent studies reveal that high levels of affluence and consumption, without compensating factors such as community involvement and close relationships, correlate to personal depression.

As an increasing global population develops and intensifies its resource use, using the same consumption patterns that developed countries have to date would create significant global consequences. Many analysts believe there is a strong likelihood that the life-support systems that sustain humanity will break down. Advances in technology can mitigate, but not fully compensate for, this expanding consumption of natural resources. Only education that informs of the consequences of choices, and builds the capacity to choose differently, will avoid this inevitable reckoning.

Instead of educating individuals to become more discriminating consumers, with unlimited desires, education can enable them to participate as co-creators of a future that is both personally rewarding and collectively sustainable. This process is already under way. Some individuals have limited their consumption to reduce use of resources or have pursued common goals, such as a cleaner environment. A major issue of the twenty-first century will be the extent to which the values that motivated these actions are adopted by a broader base of humanity. Will humanity accept the evolutionary mandate, or will individuals be primarily consumers in advanced technological society, collectively moving towards the limits of the planet to sustain life as humanity knows it?

2. A Context for Education in the Twenty-First Century

Achieving a sustainable future requires synthesizing goals of a healthy economy, environmental integrity, and human well-being. It requires effective systems in all public and private sectors that support congruence across all levels, from individual actions to international policy. Otherwise, actions undermine the intent of policies and, at the extreme, policies not implemented produce false hope that issues are being addressed adequately.

2.1. A Context for Education

The context for assessing the state of human affairs and the educational needs of the future are the ends of a decade, a century, and a millennium. It is compelling to make such an assessment not because of any calendar, but because humanity has arrived at a time for decision about its future, when options are being defined, or foreclosed, by current choices. All human systems exist in the context of the natural and social environments in which they operate. If human systems are not in harmony with them, they risk damaging the life-support systems on which humanity depends.

2.2. Rapidly Increasing Complexity

The commencement of the twenty-first century is the most complex time in recorded history, with many positive and negative forces competing for attention and resources. For the first time, humanity has the ability to alter fundamentally life-support systems of the planet, with uncertain consequences for the future. The forces now operating produce increasingly rapid rates of change in social, economic, and financial systems that are communicated nearly instantaneously via satellite to a global population connected by television and the Internet.

Global issues, such as warming and protection of the ozone layer, require long-term thinking and systemic change. In contrast, two major forces provide an incongruence that deprives humanity of the capacity to achieve long-term structural goals. First, increasingly powerful forces of financial globalization frame decisions in only monetary terms. These forces reduce decision periods with 24-hour markets driven by short-term performance criteria. Second, an emerging culture of entertainment often trivializes significant issues and uses increasingly shortened visual images that reduce attention spans and the ability to concentrate. The long-term trajectory of humanity's evolution requires systemic support and congruence.

2.3. The State of Human Development

The 1998 *Human Development Report* (HDR) published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) notes that, while fragile and reversible, the state of human development has been improving. It also states that economic growth is often seen as an end in itself that dominates policy choices. The HDR advocates including human development in all policy decisions in a more sustainable and equitable manner. Over 100 national reports since 1992 provide assessment at the country level and tools to support policy dialogues, adding to the capacity to understand the consequences of choices.

Human development to date has produced a wide disparity of income, wealth, and consumption patterns among individuals and among countries. Economic growth since World War II has increased the gap between industrialized countries and others as the developing nations' outgoing capital transfers exceeded new incoming loans and aid. The overwhelming burden of environmental pollution continues to fall on the poor within countries and among them. A fundamental goal of development should be a more equitable sharing of the benefits and burdens.

2.4. Indicators of Progress

Indicators measure the direction and the trends toward or away from established goals. Indicators can be both "static," providing the current position and trends over time, and "dynamic," creating a future's context in a rapidly changing society to indicate a capacity being built to meet future needs. For example, the number of people connected to and using the Internet provides a capacity for mass communication of important information.

The national indicator of economic progress has usually been gross domestic product (GDP). GDP is notoriously inaccurate as a measure of human well-being. GDP counts the negative societal costs, such as diagnosing and treating cancer, as a positive contribution to economic well-being. In a divorce, legal fees paid, establishing two households, and buying new furnishings are all positive, although the social costs may be high, producing a net decrease in well-being.

More accurate indicators adjust for elements not traditionally accounted for in GDP, increasing it for items that make contributions, such as work performed in the home, and decreasing it for ones that detract from overall well-being, such as crime. One, the genuine progress indicator (GPI), an alternative indicator, responds to four major shortcomings of GDP: 1) GDP regards every expenditure as an addition to well-being, 2) GDP ignores crucial economic functions such as work in the home outside the realm of monetary exchange, 3) GDP provides no indicators of the future or its value, and 4) GDP ignores distribution of income. The GPI has been falling since 1973, although GDP has continued to rise.

2.5. Allocation of Resources

Resources are allocated according to values and perceived needs. Spending is a reflection of those values (see Table 1). An opportunity exists to educate people about these spending allocations and to decide collectively if they are congruent with future needs and basic human values.

	Amount US\$ millions
Basic education for all	6 000 ^a
Water and sanitation for all	9 000 ^a
Ice cream in Europe	11 000
Basic health and nutrition	13 000 ^a
Business entertainment in Japan	35 000
Alcoholic drinks in Europe	105 000
Military spending worldwide	780 000

^a This is the estimated additional annual cost to achieve universal access to basic services in all developing countries

Source: <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/1998/en/>

Table 1. Allocation of resources: annual expenditures worldwide, 1998
(Data from <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/1998/en/>)

2.6. Environmental Impacts

A fundamental assumption of existing systems is that the environment and life-support systems will always support human activities. This assumption is invalid. Urgent global

environmental problems are a reality that can no longer be denied. The Club of Rome's original 1972 report, *The Limits to Growth*, foresaw shortages of nonrenewable resources. While fossil fuels and other nonrenewable resources are not running out, there is a growing deterioration of renewable resources, and pollution and waste production are greater than the capacity of the planet to absorb.

The consensus of scientific thought is that greenhouse gases are causing global climate change. The richest 20% of humanity produces 53% of these gases and the bottom 20% only 3% of gases, although the consequences are borne by all of humanity and mostly the poor, who have fewer options. The rich cause environmental damage through consumption and pollution, while the poor do so by using marginal and fragile ecosystems, as when the rain forest is burned to plant crops that the soil can support for only a few harvests before the cycle must be repeated.

In 1992, 1600 scientists, including over half of living Nobel laureates, issued the World Scientists Warning to Humanity describing the environmental risks of continuing current policies. A year later, 58 scientific academies, including the U.S. National Academy, the British Royal Society, the French, German, Swedish, Russian, Indian, and Third World Academies, issued a statement on population that concluded that if all people of the world consumed fossil fuels and other resources at the rate developed countries now do, it would greatly intensify already unsustainable demands on the biosphere. It further stated: "it is not prudent to rely on science and technology alone to solve problems created by rapid population growth, wasteful resource consumption, and poverty." The activities that caused these problems largely continue, adding the analogy of compound interest to the problems to be addressed.

Many unsustainable activities impinge on the quality of life and future needs, even as they provide essential products to modern societies. Four industries—paper, plastics, chemicals, and metals—account for 71% of toxic emissions in U.S. manufacturing. Metal mining causes severe environmental degradation, with air pollution, mine tailing pollution, chemical disposal, and dispersion of toxic trace metals. Such a destructive activity employs relatively few people, only 0.1% in the American west. Meanwhile, the region receives increasing revenue from tourism, the largest global economic sector, and one that requires a clean, healthy environment.

Since 1950, approximately one-fifth of the forested area of the planet has been lost. It is instructive to look at isolated areas of the world such as Easter Island, as well as populated ones such as the Iberian Peninsula, for evidence of past deforestation that destroyed life-support systems and biodiversity.

2.7. Technology and Human Sustainability in the Twenty-First Century

As the 58 national scientific academies stated in 1993, humanity can not rely on science and technology alone. Advances in technology and increases in recycling have caused fewer materials to be used per unit of output, but increases in population and the intensity of use almost always cause overall use to increase. Overall production of world materials in minerals, metals, wood products, and synthetics increased 2.4 times from the early 1960s until 1995. Even with large increases in recycling, the amount of waste

in the U.S. doubled between 1970 and 2000. Researchers at the University of British Columbia have calculated that if the entire world were to use resources with the same intensity as Americans or Canadians, the land area required would equal three more planets equivalent to Earth. Another reason technology can not be the only solution is that technology almost always produces unintended consequences, as the example of chlorofluorocarbons illustrates. Inert at sea level, they reacted in the upper atmosphere to help deplete the stratospheric ozone. Extensive recycling and removing subsidies for using virgin materials can reduce consumption, but a growing global population emulating high-consumption societies will overwhelm such efforts. Paul Ekins calculated the potential of technology using the equation first introduced by Paul Ehrlich, in which environmental impact equals population times per capita consumption times impact per unit of consumption. Ekins calculated that technological progress would need to reduce the environmental impact of consumption by a factor of 16 over 50 years to offer any significant improvement in the face of increases in population and consumption patterns.

While technological breakthroughs will occur, and currently unimagined benefits will result, it is not prudent for humanity to expect that technology alone will compensate for unsustainable policies and activities.

3. Global Consumption Patterns

The twentieth century brought an explosion in consumption with great benefits to much of humanity. Global consumption has grown 3% per year since 1970, doubling in 25 years to US\$24 trillion in 1998, with consumer spending representing approximately two-thirds of the U.S. GDP. World industrial output is now 50 times as large as in the 1890s, with most of the increase coming since 1950. Increased access to healthy food, healthcare, safe water and sanitation, schooling, information and communications technology, transportation, and energy sources for cooking, heating, lighting, production, and transportation have all contributed greatly to human well-being. This growth in consumption has also brought grossly unequal distribution of benefits, widening social inequities, damage to traditional cultures, and large-scale environmental consequences.

The greater current consumption is, the less the savings for the future. The pressure to consume in the U.S. has resulted in an official savings rate of less than 4%, compared with the Japanese rate of 16%. These two economies in the late 1990s in some ways represent the extremes of developed countries.

The U.S. approach promotes consumption based on increasing levels of debt, borrowing from the future and the rest of the world to do so, and the Japanese approach is to decline to consume, creating a stagnant environment with a lack of optimism for the future. In both cases, changing what is consumed would alter the economy and shift the impact of the choices made.

Facing a projected 150% expansion of the global economy by 2020, revolutionary approaches seem necessary to avoid continued environmental degradation, and perhaps catastrophe.

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Biographical Sketch

Joseph Kruth held a B.S. degree in chemical engineering from the University of Pittsburgh, an M.A. degree in economics from the University of Southern California, and a J.D. (law) degree from UCLA (California Bar in 1977).

In the community and non-profit realm, Joseph Kruth was a founder and chair of the Tahoe Center for a Sustainable Future, and a founder and director of the Tahoe Truckee Regional Economic Coalition, two non-profit organizations in the Tahoe region to which he volunteered his time until his death in 2001. The Tahoe Center is a community-based, non-profit that develops a sustainability curriculum for K–12 teachers and promotes information access and better decisions through public involvement, electronic communications, and the Internet (<http://www.ceres.ca.gov/tcsf>). Both programs have been acclaimed as innovative, resourceful, and valuable.

In the for profit realm, he had 30 years experience in business, finance, development, and investments. He held staff and executive positions in marketing, finance, and administration for firms in energy, pollution control, high-rise real estate development, merchant banking, and aerospace, as well as practicing business and real estate law for four years in Los Angeles. As founder of Arete, Inc., he provided strategic planning, project creation, development, and management services, working on international projects for a decade in Russia and Hong Kong. As an example, he organized and led a team of redevelopment specialists to Kaliningrad, Russia, in December 1991, performing the first institutional and economic survey of any Soviet/Russian region. The team then represented the region at investment conferences in New York and with multilateral agencies such as the World Bank.

He was a member of the Advisory Committee to the California Resources Agency for its innovative program on the Internet and World Wide Web, the California Environmental Resources Evaluation System (CERES). He regularly organized presentations and tracks for the World Future Society, “Pathways to Sustainability,” from which the book of the same title is now available at <http://ceres.ca.gov/tcsf/pathways>.