

Corporate Sponsored Education: The Limits Of Social Responsibility

<"xml encoding="UTF-8?>

ABSTRACT:

The business sector increasingly subsidizes financially challenged institutions. Representative examples would include health care, major sports arenas, and penal facilities. Among the recent beneficiaries of corporate largesse are schools. Such assistance blurs social roles and raises serious moral concerns, especially those of moral agency. Education, more so than other social institutions, determines the kind of citizen and moral character a person can become. Put differently, education operates on virtue development that may override the fiscal logic of profit-maximization practiced by corporations. In this paper I argue that whatever benefit received by struggling schools is short-lived by comparison to the long range influence achieved by a corporation via advertisements that affect the psychological preferences of children. I contend that this makes the exchange unfair insofar as it violates the autonomy of the student. Education should provide a free and open atmosphere in which critical points of view are discussed. If corporations are permitted untrammelled access to schools, social views may become one-dimensional. Economic salvation would effectively trade on the moral failure of schools.

The familiar debate over corporate social responsibility draws against the classical view of Milton Friedman that the sole responsibility of corporations is to its stockholders. This narrow view eschews corporate social responsibility for the maximization of profits whereby society would be the indirect beneficiary of market capitalism. In contrast, the broader view held by Richard DeGeorge, Tom Donaldson, and Norman Bowie argue that corporations have a social responsibility to enhance the well-being and liberty of citizens since they provide the employment pool required by increased demands of production. In many locations, there is an added incentive of tax relief for a business to remain in a community. Events over the past several years prompt revisiting social responsibility of corporations such as the thousands of unemployed as a result of downsizing; maladjusted auto air bags injuring and killing infant passengers; tobacco industry's covering up addictive chemicals used in the production of cigarettes; Prudential Securities inflating the cost of stock for personal profits; and discriminatory hiring and promotions at Texaco Oil. Although these are reasons for recasting the terms of the contract to prohibit business activities that are unambiguously injurious, there

may also be good reasons for restricting positive duties of corporations in society that are ambiguously beneficent. For while some corporations have breached the contract, others have embarked on projects that manifest a concern about the cultural and educational endeavors of institutions. It is not unusual to hear of corporate sponsorship of musical events, theatrical performances, scholarships, research grants, and the latest trend, providing sufficient subsidy that earns companies the right to have their name on sports arenas and stadiums (Boston's Fleet Center, Buffalo's Marine Midland Center, and Montreal's Molson Center). This gesture of civic good will has intensified as it extends to an institution upon which the influence may not

be so benign, that is the growing contribution to schools through classroom commercials. As budgetary crises continue in urban areas across this country due to a number of factors, one of which is the haled urban flight and loss of tax revenues to support the schools, corporations are poised to assist. Their offer to help appears innovative in light of teacher layoffs, curtailed budgets for equipment, and curriculum being eroded. Slowly school districts convince themselves that the utility factor surpasses any hope of maintaining schools any other way. School officials accede to the offers in exchange for commercials presented in a number of ways. For some it is display of logos on book covers, videos on Coca Cola and Nike shoes. The Prego sauce purported to teach the scientific method by showing that their sauce was better than Ragú. What can be offensive by such an exchange since some administrators perceived this as a win-win situation! Each institution appears to be mutually benefited. But are

they? Some schools may be inviting an identity-altering elixir. It is prudent to remind ourselves of the warning expressed by Theodore Levitt, that corporate responsibility could be dangerous.

In its guilt-driven urge to transcend the narrow limits of derived standards, the modern corporation is reshaping not simply the economic but also the institutional, social, cultural, and political topography of society . . . We do not want our lives shaped by a single viewpoint or by a single way of doing things, even if the material consequences are bountiful and the intentions are honorable.(1)

In this essay I argue that the school's benefits are short-lived, even daunted by comparison, to the elasticity of material and psychological impact produced on behalf of the sponsor. To this end I argue that, (1) the exchange is unfair in that it violates both the autonomy and the integrity of the students, and (2) a corporation's assistance to education through advertising could alter the role of schools (in a deleterious way) in society.

The exchange of goods between schools and business has its history in the series of studies that were published in the past 15 to 20 years. Illiteracy among students sounded an alarm to

a business climate that was already experiencing the inflexibility of employees to accommodate to the computer technology that was rapidly replacing them. The often cited report, *A Nation at Risk*, documented the lower level of student achievement in schools in math, English, geography, and history. Their performance was below foreign students. From the business perspective, these results were catastrophic since they were forecasting a dismal employee profile. Concern for America to be competitive in the next century catapulted corporations to intervene and help solve this problem along with political and education leaders. At the start this registered positive influence by recognizing the low incentives of the teaching profession, efforts were made to increase salaries; there was a push for professional accountability and redrafting the requirements for graduation. Educators in the early 1980s were desperate for some new approach to revitalize their programs which have failed. The movement continued slowly to assist training teachers, administrators, scholarships were created for merit students, instructional materials were provided. Some businesses served as mentors and offered organizational knowledge to schools willing to learn how their role configures in the "corporate revolution."⁽²⁾

The revolution was manifested in business-school partnerships which increased from 17% in 1984 to 51% by 1990. RJR Nabisco's version was called Next Century Schools to stimulate visionary capitalism in American schools. In Chicago a group of 50 corporation-community members were preparing a "how-to guide" to run schools more efficiently. These are formidable signs of good will that anyone would be confident in their success. As other projects of kind emerged, schools were quite receptive to corporate expertise in matters of educational solvency.

Three projects emerged that intend to assist the frail schools. Channel One, developed by Christopher Whittle, was proposed to increase the news literacy by providing monitors and appropriate dish so that students can view the current events of the day for a prescribed 10 minutes along with 2 minutes of advertisements. This spun two other programs: (1) the Edison Project, and (2) Education Alternatives, Inc. (EAI). The latter would privatize public schools in poor districts with the promise of realizing a profit by the end of their contract. Most recently, Baltimore terminated the contract with EAI since it was managing so leanly that class sizes increased with teacher lay off and curriculum was pared back in ways detrimental to special students. Channel One continues to have wider appeal since it provides what seems an innoculent exchange: monitor hook-up to global news with commercials. With confidence in corporation intervention unabated by EAI, many schools have consigned with Channel One but have also permitted straight out advertisements for equipment, book covers, and other types of

subsidy.

The Seattle school district aggressively sought sponsorships. Their goal was for \$1 million dollars a year to subsidize some programs cut by legislature shortfalls. The result is a travesty for some.

Seattle is handing over their schools to corporate interests. TCI sponsors the Nathan Hale multimedia club; the Tyee High School's Academy of Travel is sponsored by Holland America Cruise and local hotels, and Union Bay holds fashion shows. The function of education has been pervasively redefined as the creation of future employees and consumers.⁽³⁾

Both Alex Molnar, in *Giving Kids the Business*, and Roy Fox, in *Harvesting Minds*, concur that Whittle pushed Channel One to advertisers as a point of entry to the American consumer market and the opportunity to "establish brand loyalties that would last a lifetime."⁽⁴⁾

Channel One commercials range widely in content and style--from soothing, "feel good" commercials for AT&T, to the splashy graphics and loud music of Sega video game ads. The variety and volume of ads help one commercial to sell another. For instance, values and messages identified with basketball star Michael Jordan are easily transferred to other basketball stars who are pitching different products. Values, and messages are easily transferred to other products when the same person, such as Jordan, sells several different products, from Nike shoes to Gatorade to Hanes underwear. At some time during the day, students must view these ads along with the news, during which time the sound cannot be muted. As the ads are shown throughout the year, the most popular ones are repeated which builds an expectation of its own.

Commercialism worked its way into the classroom in other ways as well: classroom packets that promote Hershey's Chocolate or Kellogg's Rice Krispies; third graders practicing math by counting Tootsie Rolls; young children learning to read software that uses corporate logos like KMart, Coke, Pepsi, and Cap'n Crunch. Calvin Klein provides book covers along with tattoos sporting their logo CK! Corporate clients pay \$129,000 per million covers for a semester's exposure. "According to the company's promotional materials, students' tested 'unaided recall' of the logos and brand names on their covers is 60% to 80%. In traditional print media it is only 4% to 5%."⁽⁵⁾ The rate of exchange on investment in this market is far greater than what is given from business. What began as social responsiveness to an education crisis is transformed into huckstering in classrooms. The ethical issue involved here doesn't receive much attention since many school administrators believe their entire school would be at risk unless they engage in some exchange with business that will keep them open. This invited an exchange of inestimable worth: the autonomy and integrity of students.

Under the best of circumstances, advertising is morally controversial. The heart of the dispute is whether the advertisements are informative and nonmanipulative or deceptive and a contrivance of needs denying personal autonomy. These positions are divided on the conditions for autonomous choice. According to critics, the sales promotions are designed to create a desire in the consumer and provide the means of satisfying this desire. Appropriating human choice under the guise of consumer need is excess control and a violation of autonomy. They agree with John Kenneth Galbraith, ". . . given that the consumer wants are created by the process by which they are satisfied, the consumer makes no choice. He is subject to the forces of advertising and emulation by which production creates its own demands." (6) This, Galbraith calls, "dependence effect." Information is not used as criterion of purchasing an item. Instead it is the fabricated desires by business. Accordingly, all the advertisements preempt a genuine desire but finesse the technique of having us accept/choose it as though it were our own. The classical Kantian concept of autonomy is violated here. Any interference of the moral agent's will by external causal events would be an obstacle and a detriment to my self as a person. Deceptive product claims or misleading information are forms of using the consumer's subjective interests and not fulfilling it. A prime example is Continental Baking Company's producing of a "dietary bread." Profile bread was marketed as if it were lower in calories but the slices in each loaf were thinner, therefore fewer calories. The FTC intervened for corrections.

In defense of advertising, Robert Arrington (7) argues that first order desires are rarely induced by commercials. For the most part, viewers select desires upon reflection and thereby endorse it. He offers the example of A-1 Steak Sauce. The consumer could disown it as incompatible with her sense of taste and diet. To choose it against what I identify as my set of values in food would count as a violation of autonomy. However, Arrington contends that choices express my autonomy insofar as I reflect and accept the desired good compatible with my sense of self, since to do so is rational and not doing so is originating in external causes. People resist these external causes--manipulative ads--knowing they would not be satisfying desires coherent with other desires I attribute to myself. The capability to do this is evidence of second order desire, (8) that is, choosing one's own first-order desires and disallowing their source through advertisements.

Part of the self-understanding entailed by my acquired tastes and cultural beliefs induce my desires. Consider anti-aging creams, Neutrogena, Oil of Olay, and Grecian Formula 16. These reflect a cultural obsession with material aspects of well-being: "look young--feel young" as the motto goes. This is of no small importance (need) in a society that discriminates against

age. People seek youth in these products which will grant sustained employment and an active social life. Cereals (Special K & Cheerios) promote good health and a trim figure. Sustecal dietary supplement users appear vital and energetic in their silver years in comparison to just

Ensure users who are sluggish and tired.

Galbraith and Arrington pose views on autonomy from opposite sides of the spectrum. By narrowly framing autonomy as self-initiator of desires, Galbraith finds most advertisements objectionable since they are externally inducing unneeded products. The fact that people choose these items does not mitigate control of their choice since the wants are created by what he calls the "dependence effect." So there are few autonomous acts on Galbraith's view in a corporate dominated society. Galbraith's account implies a concept of "self" that is abstracted from experience. It is a disembodied agent unaffected by and unrelated to the social environment. Not all wants are created equally. Some are constraints while others are enhanced by choices, e.g. low fat foods. The high rate of heart ailments can be curtailed by selective--nonfat foods--products. We also have utility companies reminding consumers of responsible and efficient energy use. Reasons for consumer choices, however, are culturally situated in a wide arena of relational goods. Autonomy is exercised when our choices can help enhance these relational goods and improve our own sense of self-worth.

Whereas, on Arrington's account, the margin of autonomy is too broadly construed--so that no interference in desires is attributed to advertising. The criterion of autonomy is, the agent can accept or reject first order desires by reflecting on those that are coherent with his self-understanding. Arrington's account overlooks the implicit influence of being culturally situated. The sense of self-understanding the consumer will measure their desires against is an aggregate of social institutional influences. What may appear as a second order choice of a first order desire may be a displacement by yet another, more compelling first order desire. There is a duration factor to desires such as selecting Dockers slacks now whereas 2 years ago 501 Levi jeans would have been the choice. By rejecting or accepting first order desires does not imply that the consumer is exercising autonomy, so much as being moved by first-order desires of group identity (one's peers). As Richard Lippke writes, "the indication of this formation of particular desires or particular choices within a lifestyle is hardly comforting [to autonomy]." (9)

If competing views of autonomy and advertising are unsatisfactory for adults, so much the worse for children, especially when they are marketed as a target audience. Autonomy is a discoverable value that is blunted by too early and weighted influence from ads. As a child develops her

self-knowledge through custom and experimenting with its limits, she comes to refine and alter choices. Choices become measured against ideals influenced from parents, education, culture, and one's own imagination. Confined and prescribed classroom ads restrict this free expression. There are three most restrictive aspects to advertisements in classrooms: (1) children are a literally captive audience who comply with agreements made by school administrators, without their own consent; (2) the school population is generally poorer since they are students in more fiscally delicate schools; and (3) the group targeted is at a psychologically impressionable age who are expected to have longer associations with the product.

All three aspects mitigate against fostering a detached, critical assessment of the product pitched. Matters are worsened when those among them can satisfy the desire immediately promoted, dividing the groups economically. Commercials in school might provide the critical apparatus, the reasons for or against purchase based on quality. Whereas at home, both parents and child could address both quality and cost questions. Absent the parents, children only bring home the need to have the object without full assessment of its worth. This

becomes a potentially divisive means of leverage between parent and child.(10)

Commercialism or huckstering in classrooms is exploitative of children and their relations with parents and friends. They cannot choose not to view the ads, nor reject the acceptable climate provided by teachers and administrators. To this extent, the institution that is designed for truth and free discussion is compromising these conditions. In its place they have an atmosphere where children can develop "false beliefs and unreasonable expectations."(11)

Some may object, this is what children view under normal home conditions with added benefit of global news. "Indeed, if children recognize that commercials are trying to sell things but lack the concepts to assess and deliberate about products advertised, the charge that advertisers are 'using' children or attempting to use them to sell their wares is strengthened."(12)

Business may express the concern for employment for the future but this is a communal concern and requires a balanced response. Any institution that takes charge of the solution of American educational blight should exercise self-restraint lest all social institutions become profit motivated in all their decisions. This one-dimensionality will poison the very source since it will not encourage the growth that comes from criticism and detached thinking. Education must be protected from corporations' opportunistic interventions; educational integrity must be above the bottom line.

Education does many things, from teaching kids how to read to teaching ethics and responsibility. If you focus too much on the economy, you squeeze out some of those other

values. When businessmen get into the educational business and they are focusing on the kind
(of workers they need, the curriculum becomes narrow, technical, and de-liberal.(13

Notes

- (1) Theodore Levitt. "The Dangers of Social Responsibility." In *Ethical Theory and Business*, (Eds.) Tom L. Beauchamp and Norman Bowie. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1979) p. 139.
- (2) Alex Molnar. *Giving Kids the Business*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996) p. 12.
- (3) David Brewster. *Weekly Washington*, p. 6, 1997.
- (4) Alex Molnar, p. 66.
- (5) D. Stead. *New York Times*, January 5, 1997, p. 33.
- (6) John Kenneth Galbraith. "The Dependence Effect," in Beauchamp and Bowie, p. 500.
- (7) Robert Arrington. "Advertising and Behavior Control." In *Business Ethics*, (Ed.) Thomas I. White. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1993) p. 578.
- (8) See Henry Frankfurt. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *Journal of Philosophy*, LXVIII (1971), 5-20.
- (9) Richard L. Lippke. "Advertising and the Social Conditions of Autonomy." In Thomas I. White, p. 586.
- (10) See Lynn Sharp Paine. "Children as Consumers: An Ethical Evaluation of Children's Television Advertising." In Thomas I. White, p. 619.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 622.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 623.
- (13) P. Applebome. *New York Times*, March 16, 1997, p. E5