

TEACHING ABOUT FAIRTRADE

Susan Gallwey

Introduction

For nearly twenty years, Fairtrade has been a prominent feature in the Irish development education landscape. Because its trading system pertains to tea, coffee, chocolate and other food items that we all enjoy, Fairtrade is considered to be an accessible approach to global development issues. However, despite Fairtrade's popularity as a development education theme, the learning that goes on in Fairtrade education often remains unexamined. In this article, I look at Fairtrade education opportunities in the formal sector at primary and secondary levels, based on the experiences of the Waterford One World Centre (WOWC) and local schools in the Waterford area. I also describe the differences between consumer-based Fairtrade learning and critical Fairtrade learning, and explore the relationship between the two.

Fairtrade education in the formal sector

The WOWC has utilised a variety of approaches to raise awareness, educate and promote action on Fairtrade issues in the local community. In the 1990s, our Fairtrade education strategy was linked closely to the Centre's Fairtrade shop. Because there was a comparatively low level of public awareness of Fairtrade at that time, we focused on providing visitors to the shop with basic information about the trading system. This led to giving Fairtrade talks in local schools and churches, which in turn developed into providing participatory workshops on Fairtrade and related issues.

Since 2000, Fairtrade education in the formal sector has been a strategic priority for the WOWC. We have delivered in-service training courses for teachers, developed curriculum-linked workshops for students and organised events for schools during Fairtrade Fortnight each year. Fairtrade Fortnight is an annual event where fair and ethical trading practices are celebrated and promoted.

In all of our formal sector work, we seek to link Fairtrade concepts to established curricula. At primary level, our main curricular target is

geography, in particular the strand unit ‘trade and development issues’ (DES, 1999:77). Through hands-on activities such as ‘The World in a Supermarket Bag’ (Oxfam, 1998:22), we encourage young children to explore why some of our food comes from so far away, and to consider how benefits from trade are distributed locally and globally.

Primary-level Fairtrade education is also well suited to cross-curricular theme work (Ruane, et al, 1999:12). Our workshops support curricular areas as diverse as history (the origins of the chocolate trade) and mathematics (how the profits from a chocolate bar are divided). There are many opportunities for creativity: for example, in 2002 the WOWC and Waterford Youth Drama produced a Fairtrade play that toured local primary schools.

At secondary level, perhaps the greatest curricular opportunity exists in Junior Cycle Civil, Social and Political Education (CSPE), which is taken by students aged 12 to 15 years old. In this course, students are required to design and implement an ‘Action Project’ (DES, 1998) on a relevant theme of their choice. Each year, the WOWC is approached by groups of local students who have selected Fairtrade as their Action Project theme. In response, we provide workshops to explore Fairtrade issues, concluding with an ‘action matrix’ exercise (ActionAid, 2003:101) that enables the young people to decide upon a realistic, appropriate and effective action to support Fairtrade.

In the Republic of Ireland, Senior Cycle is a non-compulsory period of education offered to students aged 15 to 18 years old who have successfully completed Junior Cycle. The Senior Cycle geography syllabus offers an optional project to explore Fairtrade within the context of the theme ‘global interdependence’ (DES, 2003:33). The significance of Fairtrade was highlighted in the 2009 Leaving Certificate exam, which included an optional question on how it supports sustainable development (SEC, 2009:26). To support study in this area, we provide teachers and students with resources from our lending library and information sheets about relevant websites.

Although CSPE and geography are the major areas of focus, Honan (2006) points out that there are opportunities for Fairtrade work across a wide range of second-level subjects, from agricultural science to religious education. At the WOWC, we have been involved with some unusual

Fairtrade initiatives from schools, such as a Fairtrade ‘mini-company’ set up by Transition Year (TY) business students.

Although the WOWC’s work focuses on Fairtrade learning in the formal curriculum, we have found that there is a cross-over between our formal sector work and our non-formal, community-based Fairtrade projects. For example, when Waterford made its successful bid to become a Fairtrade City in 2005, several students who had participated in our school workshops became active and valuable members of the Fairtrade City Action Group.

Challenges in Fairtrade education

It is evident from the above examples that there are many opportunities to bring Fairtrade issues into primary and second-level classrooms. But it is important to identify what participants actually learn from these Fairtrade educational initiatives.

We aim to provide students with an age-appropriate understanding of how the world’s trading systems create unequal distributions of wealth and power, and how Fairtrade can help redress these imbalances. Students learn about the five goals of Fairtrade:

- A fair and stable price to farmers for their products;
- Extra income for farmers and estate workers to improve their lives;
- A greater emphasis on environmental concerns;
- A stronger position for small farmers in world markets; and
- A closer link between consumers and producers (Litvinoff & Madeley, 2007:16).

This learning seems to be straightforward, but it can lead into challenging territory. The Fairtrade benefits received by global Southern producers depend, of course, upon consumers in the North buying Fairtrade products. Therefore, Fairtrade education may appear to give the message that *buying* is the ‘solution’ to poverty in the South. Whilst it can be argued that ethical consumption is an important first step towards genuine civic engagement (see O’Rourke 2006:301 for a summary of this debate), some students can become so focused on their new role as Fairtrade consumers that other learning possibilities are eclipsed. Tucker (2006:9), a producer from

Sierra Leone, warns against a mindset which sees Fairtrade as ‘just a brand of food that demonstrates you are paying a little more to desperate farmers’.

Andreotti’s (2006:46) framework of ‘soft’ versus ‘critical’ global education can be usefully applied to Fairtrade education. We can argue that ‘soft’ Fairtrade education focuses solely on how purchasing these products helps farmers and communities in the global South. ‘Critical’ Fairtrade education, however, requires an examination of the legacy of colonialism and an exploration of how our own culture’s perceived needs have driven the trade agenda. Critical Fairtrade education should address the relationship between trade and aid, and make connections between Fairtrade and major development themes such as human rights, sustainable development and gender equality.

Critical Fairtrade education is an ambitious goal, requiring substantial commitment from both educators and learners. Because the WOWC, like most development education organisations, is not part of the mainstream education system, our contact with teachers and students is often limited. To encourage genuine critical engagement within the confines of the brief time-slots typically allocated to development education is very difficult, if not impossible. Consequently, Fairtrade education work carried out in schools by ‘outsiders’ such as the WOWC requires follow-up by teachers if critical learning is to take place.

Students’ responses to Fairtrade education

To make a start towards exploring the nature of Fairtrade learning, last year I carried out some informal research involving seven classes of TY students. The students viewed *Black Gold* (Francis & Francis, 2006), a powerful documentary about Ethiopian coffee producers, and then participated in an hour-long workshop. At the close of the workshop, I asked students to read four statements and to indicate which one best summed up their personal ideas about Fairtrade. After indicating their choices, students discussed the statements in a plenary session. The statements, and percentage of students choosing each one, are listed in the table below:

1	Fairtrade is about using our power as consumers to help people in need.	34%
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2	Fairtrade is about empowering producers and their communities to make their own choices about what is important for their development.	47%
3	Fairtrade is about recognising that people all over the world depend upon each other in different and sometimes unequal ways.	12%
4	The term ‘fair trade’ is a ridiculous over-exaggeration. We need a much more profound change in the world before we can honestly stand before a producer and say that our relationship with one another is ‘fair’ (Roy Scott quoted in Tucker, 2006:9).	7%

34% of students chose Statement 1, which depicts Fairtrade as a means of using Northern consumer power to provide ‘help’ for the South. Comments made by students who selected Statement 1 indicated that the film and workshop had made them aware of Fairtrade products, and that they planned to purchase Fairtrade goods. No one who selected this statement mentioned broader development issues nor did they comment on the language of the statement (e.g., ‘our power’ and ‘people in need’).

The largest percentage of students (47 per cent) chose Statement 2, which connects Fairtrade to empowerment and development, and an additional 12 per cent chose Statement 3, which associates Fairtrade with the concept of global interdependence. Comments from students who chose these statements (e.g., ‘Being paid a decent price for their work means that producers don’t have to rely on food aid’) suggest that the film and workshop had successfully acted as a ‘way in’ to the consideration of broader development themes.

Finally, a small but not insignificant percentage (7 per cent) of students selected Statement 4, which asserts that we need ‘a much more profound change’ in our world. In two of the seven workshops, this statement sparked intense discussion about how fundamental social change can, or cannot, be achieved.

To summarise the findings from this informal research process, roughly one-third of the students showed evidence of ‘soft’, consumer-based Fairtrade learning. The remaining two-thirds showed at least some degree of ‘critical’ learning (which of course does not preclude consumer awareness as

well). Further research is needed to provide more detailed insights into this area; it would be especially interesting to chart learners' responses over the course of an extended Fairtrade education programme.

Fairtrade education and Fairtrade shopping

I recently had an opportunity to explore Fairtrade education from an unusual angle, through my involvement with a European Union project titled 'Accessing Development Education'. This project involved teachers and development education practitioners from Ireland, Scotland, Cyprus, Lithuania and Bulgaria.

During a training week held in Lithuania, I was asked to facilitate Fairtrade workshops for teachers from the five participating countries. I approached these workshops with some trepidation because I was unsure about levels of awareness and interest in Fairtrade issues in the five countries. However, I was surprised to discover that teachers from Lithuania and Bulgaria, where virtually no Fairtrade products are available in shops, were very enthusiastic about Fairtrade activities. The teachers said that they would use these activities in their own classrooms to promote understanding of interdependence and to develop a sense of the importance of 'fair play' in trade, locally and globally. Indeed, as a follow-up to the conference, a Bulgarian primary school produced a DVD of their students working on the 'Banana Sketch' - despite the fact that they did not have the option of purchasing Fairtrade bananas.

This example is worth bearing in mind in relation to the many young people in Ireland, who, for whatever reason, are not able to purchase (or more accurately, persuade their parents to purchase) Fairtrade products. We need a Fairtrade education strategy that is broad enough to encompass a range of actions, so that people who cannot purchase the goods do not feel that they have 'failed'. Certainly, it is vital to the Fairtrade movement that people purchase the products, but as educators, we need to highlight other strands of action as well, such as lobbying decision-makers at local, national and global levels.

Conclusion

WOWC's experience of Fairtrade education suggests that it *can* promote real learning about global development issues. However, this learning will not happen simply by handing out Fairtrade stickers and sample tea bags. Opportunities for Fairtrade education abound in established curricula, and it is up to development education practitioners to encourage critical engagement with the many complex issues surrounding Fairtrade. Fairtrade Fortnight offers excellent learning opportunities each year, including the chance for young people to meet face-to-face with producers from the global South (through Fairtrade Mark Ireland's producers' tour). I highly recommend celebrating Fairtrade Fortnight 2010 to explore the full potential of Fairtrade education.

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