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## Representing to Increase Student Understanding

During my orientation practicum, I taught an interactive mini-unit of my own design on global production and responsible consumption to a grade 6/7 classroom. The unit considered where goods are made, why many are made abroad, and the consequences arising from the globalization of production. In order to illustrate the process and to engage learners, we (Division One) traced the life-cycle of a t-shirt from its creation in a factory in Bangladesh to its purchase by a final wearer in a Ugandan market. My school advisor (or practicum teacher) wanted me to share with the students something that I am passionate and knowledgeable about (i.e. my content knowledge), as he saw the enthusiasm that would “shine through” as being fundamental to the building of a strong rapport and teacher identity with the students. I have chosen to focus my assignment on segments of this mini-unit as it involved several complex issues, some of which I could and should have illustrated in a more accessible and meaningful way. As aptly stated by Lee S. Shulman, the “central question ... [is how] the successful college student transforms his or her expertise in the subject matter into a form that that high school [and elementary school] students can comprehend?” (1986, p. 8). While I am still in but the nascent stages of my teaching “career”, discussion and reflection in this class and in others has already provided me with ideas as to how I could have approached the material differently so as to foster greater student understanding and, thus, knowledge. The segments which I will seek to better are: “We are all consumers”, “What can we do as consumers?”, and “The breaking of the bale”.

### “We are all consumers”

The following are the first slides and accompanying text of lesson one of my mini-unit. The idea was to have students understand that we are all consumers, i.e. that we aspire to purchase “things”, and, in many cases, things that we do not need. While the students understood this introductory segment, I believe I lost some when I quite suddenly framed consumption as negative – why, if they could afford an iPhone 5, a mountain bike, a yacht, and a private island, should they not buy them (I did not point out that \$1 million is unlikely to cover the purchase of a yacht or an island, let alone both!)? Given that I did not invite discussion of the causes and consequences of consumerism at the societal level prior to moving on (I was too nervous at this point!), it is likely that many students considered this lesson segment solely from a personal vantage point (i.e. how will this serve me?). As such, it is unlikely that these students *believed* that purchasing \$1 million worth of consumer goods was anything but desirable. If this was, in fact, the case, then student knowledge may have suffered as a result of my haste during the first part of the lesson (as “belief is a necessary condition of knowledge” [Smith & Siegel, 2004, p. 555]).



“Imagine that everyone in Division 1 pitches into buying a bunch of lottery tickets, agreeing to split the \$30 million jackpot evenly if one of the tickets wins...

And Division 1 wins!!!

So everyone gets \$1 million!

If everyone could get out a piece of paper and a pen or pencil, I’m going to give you 3 minutes to scribble down

anything that you would spend the winnings on

You can write as much or as little as you’d like

[Share items on list]

The point is, we are all consumers! We like to buy lots of stuff!



But does anyone see a problem with what I'm saying? Is there an alternative to buying things?



So maybe we do have to buy some things, but most would agree that as a society, we buy a lot more than we actually need.

- Look at your list – how many of these things do you NEED?
- A lot of companies are very good at creating new “needs” – can you think of any? (New versions of things like iPhones, Eco-friendly or green products, beauty products)

Have you guys heard of, or participated in, Buy Nothing Day?

Do you know what it's all about?

- Started by Adbusters, which is based in Vancouver, in the 90s
- Org is very concerned with the social and environmental impacts of consumerism (watch <http://vimeo.com/56821946>)

So returning to consumer mode, what are some of the things you think about when you're buying something?

- e.g. price, label, quality, quantity...
- Unlikely to hear where item is made"

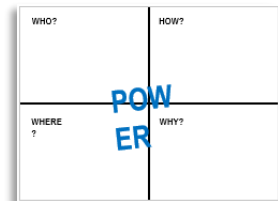
If I was able to redo the lesson, I would invite classroom discussion on the subject of consumerism: Why do we buy what we buy? Do we need everything that we purchase? What factors induce us to buy things that we do not need (e.g. advertising, status/popularity, gratification, etc.)? What do these contributing factors say about our society? What are the consequences of (excessive) consumption? As advocated by Patrick Dias, as well as by my school advisor, I would invite discussion by “allowing enough time for the students to think and respond” (1992, p. 14). Whereas when I taught my first few lessons I was most focussed on getting through the material, I am now far more comfortable with modifying my expectations (lesson plans) to permit for meaningful, in-depth discussions. If sufficient time had been afforded, I would also have liked to explore the targeting of youth by marketers, a subject which is detailed by Naomi Klein in “No Logo”.

### “What can we do as consumers?”

After having looked broadly at global production, we focussed on the case of garment, and specifically t-shirt, production. As a class, we examined the reasons for the movement of garment factories from Latin America to China and then from China to South and Southeast Asia. We then looked at the expected path of development, from low- to high-tech goods production, and compared this to Bangladesh's continued stagnation. The reasons for and consequences of this lack of change were discussed, which involved an exploration of power – i.e. who, ultimately, holds the power to create change for garment workers in countries like Bangladesh? The following at the slides which accompanied this discussion:

“-The way you've been examining power this week is actually an ideal way of looking at how change can be created in Bangladesh!

- I actually talked to table 3 about this earlier this week.
- Who do you guys think has the most power when it comes to shaping the wages of Bangladeshi garment workers?
- Brainstorm at tables for 5 minutes...



Some key players to think about: Workers, factory owners, managers, charities, COMPANIES/BRANDS, CONSUMERS!

-What about companies or brands – do they have power?

When you go to buy clothing, do you tend to go to certain favourite stores?

-Isn't that a kind of power, “brand loyalty”?

-It comes from the image and the following that the brand has cultivated

-Isn't a brand kind of like a celebrity or a popular person then? Doesn't it rely on others for its power and influence?

- Who does it rely on for power? CONSUMERS!
- And what would happen if we, as consumers, lost trust in the brand, maybe because we see it treating workers unfairly?
- Wouldn't it lose power?
- So don't consumers hold the most power to create change?
- So the BIG question is what can WE do to create change?"

I really rushed through this section of the second lesson as I was worried that it was unclear and, thus, would result in students losing interest. I was surprised by how much trouble students had with the power and potential for change exercise – they are a very advanced group of learners, so I have a tendency to forget that they are merely in grades 6 and 7! Looking back, I am sure that I moved too swiftly through the tail-end of the lesson and overloaded the students with information. Had I divided the material into two lessons, I could have guided the class through their exploration of power and created much more helpful visuals (showing the relationships between garment companies, factory owners, garment workers, consumers, and charities). I also wonder whether working through the “focused conversation” guidelines, from their own perspectives as consumers, may have helped students to arrive at potential courses of change-promoting action.

### “The breaking of the bale”

This section of the third lesson dealt with t-shirts arriving in Kenya (bound together in large bales) after having been donated, sorted, and shipped abroad by Canadians. Ever since I taught this lesson, I have lamented the fact that I missed a fantastic opportunity for a powerful end to my mini-unit – while I recognized the opportunity for the involvement of the whole class in embodied learning, I passed it up out of fear of creating a classroom management issue for myself. The following slides have already been updated to include the changes I want to include the next time that I teach this lesson – I have highlighted them in yellow and will explain their purpose below:



“I’m going to focus on Uganda as I’m most familiar with what happens there. So the big bails of clothing that I just showed you arrive at a port in Kenya, then some are transported by land to surrounding countries like Uganda. -Each bail is purchased for about \$140 by someone in Uganda looking to make some money simply by importing the clothing and then reselling it to people who will prepare the t-shirts for sale, who will then sell them to vendors, who will then sell the t-shirts in their market stalls.

**\*\*\*Get volunteers to somewhat act out the WHOLE process!**

-Choose importer, then have importer choose 8 people to break the bail, then have each of these people choose 2 people each to cut and tailor their t-shirts, then have the 8 people choose 1-2 people (vendors) to sell their finished t-shirts to!

-What do students notice? Everyone’s up front (all ~30)! What does this mean? All ~30 people derived a source of income/employment from a bail of clothing deemed valueless by North Americans!!

-When that first person buys the bail for \$140, they can’t open it up to see what’s included – they have to buy it and hope it contains good, sellable clothing.

-This person then sells the bail to 8 other people, who pay roughly \$20 each

-The person selling the bail then cuts the bail open and the 8 people get to sweep in and grab whatever they can!

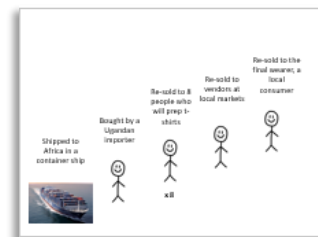
-This is called “the breaking of the bail”

-These 8 people then take whatever they managed to scoop up to sell to vendors in market stalls across Uganda.

Just to recap: Go through diagram again

In looking at this diagram, do you guys see any benefits to this process?? HINT: look at all the people involved

**\*\*Jobs created, value created out of something was deemed valueless, and eco-friendly!”**



By having the whole class participate in the simulated process of buying, breaking, and selling the contents of the bale, particularly during the late stages of a lesson, student engagement and learning could have been increased. As explained by Jim Parsons and Larry Beauchamp (2012), by engaging the minds and bodies of students in learning, knowledge can be broadened (i.e. embodied knowledge can be generated). Furthermore, the statement made by having all of the students up at the front of the class, engaged in value-generating economic activity, would have been a powerful and positive ending to the unit. Unfortunately, however, I had asked only one student to act out the role of the initial purchaser of the bale, and this individual had selected but four other students to break the bale (each chosen student represented two bale-breakers). I hope to have the chance to teach this unit again in the future as I am sure that these changes would greatly improve student understanding and, thus, learning.