



The Story of Stuff – One Perspective On Our System of Consumerism

Background: It is important to stress to your students that the video and information that they will be exposed to during this activity represent the opinions of several individuals (refer back to the Opinion Activity). The students must examine the information presented with a critical eye. It is up to each individual student to determine if they agree with this representation of consumerism or if they have a different opinion. The instructor should allow adequate time at the end of these activities to discuss the content that is presented and the perspective that is given. Make sure to have your students read “Another Viewpoint” at the end of this activity.

Publisher’s description of material’s content --

The Story of Stuff is a 20-minute film that takes viewers on a provocative and eye-opening tour of the real costs of our consumer driven culture—from resource extraction to iPod incineration.

Annie Leonard, an activist who has spent the past 10 years traveling the globe fighting environmental threats, narrates the Story of Stuff, delivering a rapid-fire, often humorous and always engaging story about “all our stuff—where it comes from and where it goes when we throw it away.” Leonard examines the real costs of extraction, production, distribution, consumption and disposal, and she isolates the moment in history where she says the trend of consumption mania began. The Story of Stuff examines how economic policies of the post-World War II era ushered in notions of “planned obsolescence” and “perceived obsolescence” —and how these notions are still driving much of the U.S. and global economies today.

Leonard’s inspiration for the film began as a personal musing over the question, “Where does all the stuff we buy come from, and where does it go when we throw it out?” She traveled the world in pursuit of the answer to this seemingly innocent question, and what she found along the way were some very guilty participants and their unfortunate victims.

Annie Leonard is an expert in international sustainability and environmental health issues, with more than 20 years of experience investigating factories and dumps around the world. During the 1990s, Annie visited countries throughout Asia to track

Systems Thinking and Sustainability

exported waste from the U.S. and Europe. She documented her findings in many articles and testified before the U.S. Congress in 1992 on the issue of international waste trafficking, in an effort to ban US waste exports to the Third World. Annie's most recent project, the Story of Stuff, explores the global materials economy and its impact on economy, environment and health.

Goal: Students will apply the concepts of economics, environment, social equity, and critical thinking skills to examine one perspective on consumerism.

Objectives: Students will...

- Draw inferences and conclusions
- Identify the concepts of sustainability
- Separate opinion from fact
- Use data to make a balanced decision
- Rationalize their decisions
- Understand the perspectives and opinions of others
- Examine how media can be used as a tool to deliver a message

Materials (for a class of 30):

- Class set of computers with Internet access to <http://www.storyofstuff.com>
- Computer projection system

Time Required: 1 to 2 – 45-60 minute class periods

Standards Met: C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, E1, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9, E13, E15, E16, E17, E18, E19, G4, G5, S6, M16, LA1, LA2, LA3, LA4, LA6, LA7, LA8, LA9

Procedure:

Hint: Use a computer projection system to guide the students through these activities.

- Have the students go to the following website: <http://www.storyofstuff.com>
- Tell them not to watch the video at this time but to go to the Resource section and open the Fact Sheet (pdf).
- Have you students read the Fact Sheet and discuss it.
- After the student have finished discussing the Fact Sheet, have them open the Glossary in the Resource section and skim over the terms that are presented. At this time, it is only important to have them understand where to find a term if they do not understand what it means when it is presented in the video.
- Tell the students to return to the Home page and have them view the main video, "The Story of Stuff."
- After all students have finished viewing the video, have them open the section entitled "Host a Screening" on the Home page and select Discussion Guide.
- Go through the discussion questions with your students allowing them ample time for their input.

Optional Activities:

- After viewing the video, have the students make a list of several subsystems that are represented within the system of consumerism, several components, and explain how the subsystems and components influence the overall system.

Systems Thinking and Sustainability

- Have the students open the section “Group Activities” and “Taking Action” under “Hosting a Screening” on the Home page.
- Have the students try some of the group activities or design a plan of action that they would like to pursue.

Another Viewpoint:

Review and Analysis of “The Story of Stuff”

Author: Unknown

<http://www.andybrain.com/qna/2007/12/07/annie-leonards-the-story-of-stuff-review-and-analysis/>

Question:

My friend Mark sent me this video link - if you have 20 minutes, check it out...and Andy, I'm especially curious to know what you think about it....

Answer:

Yikes. That's like handing someone “War and Peace”, and then saying, “tell me what you think of it”.

Where would one begin?

The link points to “The Story of Stuff”, a video by Annie Leonard. This article contains my thoughts and a short review of “The Story of Stuff”. It'll be most helpful if you've seen The Story of Stuff before reading this review.

Overall impressions: I strongly agreed with some points, strongly disagreed with others. It seemed to me that Annie Leonard and The Story of Stuff primarily is a warning against consumerism and global corporations.

This is bad and good at the same time. It's good because there were some valid points. It's bad because some parts sounded like extremism, and some were, I believe, simply incorrect.

Here are my impressions on each aspect in The Story of Stuff:

EXTRACTION

“We're running out of resources.”

True. We do need to focus more on renewable energy, and the political will just isn't there.

“The USA is 5% of global population, but uses 30% of resources.”

...The USA also produces 27% of the world's GDP. 30% of resources, 27% of GDP: this seems to be a good measure of our efficiency, not waste. Any economists out there who can explain to me why this is bad?

PRODUCTION

"Toxics, toxics, toxics." It's more repetitious than a "Head-On" commercial. I felt like I was being manipulated through this section because of the focus on telling you that any big company's PRODUCTION produces TOXICS with zero benefit.

Now, for those who've noticed (particularly those with small children), there have been tons of recalls lately about lead-infused children's toys. This is a justifiable concern - these things are way above acceptable toxicity levels.

Then Annie Leonard raised the freak-out level: We dip our pillows in BFR (brominated flame retardants), a horribly toxic man-made chemical, and we sleep on them!

Not knowing anything about BFRs, I did some research on this. I found two things:

One, BFRs are used primarily in electronics and electronics plastics. Things like computer circuit boards, the plastic casing around a TV set, around the rubber sheaths encasing wires in a computer, that kind of thing. And the BFRs are chemically bonded to those components. That means they're not flying into the air, we're not breathing them in.

Two, I was unable to find any evidence of companies dipping pillows or pillowcases in BFRs before selling them. I find this quote interesting:

"There is no federal standard requiring flame resistance of bed clothes, such as sheets, comforters, mattress pads and pillows. Additionally, the industry tends to avoid use of flame retardant chemicals on sheets, pillowcases and blankets because they have direct contact with skin, according to Gordon Damant."

Here's another article on BFRs. An important point it keeps making is that studies of the effects and exposure methods of BFRs are conflicting. We just don't have enough information yet:

"These concentrations are low, but because HBCD has the potential to bioaccumulate and persist in the environment, there is cause for concern. Overall, the available literature on HBCD is incomplete and conflicting, emphasizing the need for more information on developmental effects, endocrine disruption, and longer term effects, including carcinogenesis."

Now, The Story of Stuff said that women in the USA (and Canada, which the video didn't mention) have the highest amounts of BFAs in their breast milk, compared to other countries. This, from what I can tell, is true. But remember: We also have lead in our bodies. And arsenic. And a whole bunch of other nasty things we pick up from our environment. This constant collection of toxic bits in our body even has a name: "Body burden". We all have it. The question is...at what point does it become dangerous?

Systems Thinking and Sustainability

Just because we have detectable amounts of arsenic in our body, for example, does not mean we're in danger of dying from arsenic poisoning.

I'm not necessarily disagreeing with Annie Leonard here, but I do think more research and facts are needed before I can completely agree with what she's saying.

DISTRIBUTION

A \$4.99 radio - how is it so cheap? So many parts and processes to make the radio MUST cost much more than \$4.99! What are the true costs of production?

Answer: Mass-production and out-of-country factories. I don't discount everything she says about the hidden costs of the production itself, but come on now - if all production was in the USA, or if that radio's components weren't stamped out on a robotic assembly line with unskilled laborers snapping them together at dozens per minute, that \$4.99 radio would be exponentially more expensive.

I think The Story of Stuff didn't address this aspect because it would draw attention away from the point about hidden costs. I'm not saying I like how everything we buy is the stereotypical "Made in China", but I certainly think it affects this portion of Annie Leonard's statement.

A side note here, since at this point in the video, we were treated to the Big Fat Corporate Guy with a Dollar Sign on his Chest further abusing the word for his own selfish gains.

That's true. That's capitalism. But it's kept in check, ideally, by market competition and consumer demand (like what this video recommends). One thing that always frustrates me is that some people hate corporations, while still using their benefits. They hate big, nationwide or global-sized businesses. They want everything to be localized down to the mom-and-pop store level. Then they get in their car, use their computer or cell phone and send an email.

Those last things would either not be possible or affordable without big business. Without a corporation paying zillions for research and development, without mass-production, without a large production and distribution infrastructure, we arguably wouldn't have the Internet...or affordable cars with easily repairable parts...or computers and email. And even if you forget those "consumer" products, and focus just on healthcare: Who do you think developed that flu shot and other disease inoculations...or the heart stint procedure that probably saved the lives of multiple people in my family...or AIDS and cancer research...or the almost-worldwide eradication of polio...or (to use a specific example from someone I know) advances in knee implants, providing knee pain relief, faster recovery and less physical therapy, a wonderful alternative to total knee replacement?

You can't have it both ways, denouncing a company while using its products to improve your life. I'm not saying corporate evils aren't there - they are - but I think people miss that big business does a lot of good, too.

The video mentioned planned obsolescence and perceived obsolescence.

Fine. I understand the concepts, and can name ways I see this myself.

But then she started talking about computers. Careful now, that's my turf.

You know when you're watching a movie, and when you see the movie, some plot point deals with something you're experienced at? Computers, science, psychology, medical issues, whatever - and the movie screws it up, either getting the point completely wrong, or dumbing it down into a non-sequitor (sic) mess? Well, that's what happened here.

Computer technology does change fast. And in some cases, yes, this is planned obsolescence. But not in the way Annie Leonard described it:

The "piece that changes" in a computer (the piece the video said triggers the obsolescence) is presumably the CPU. And it's just a "small corner piece". Well... no. If you want detail, let me know, and I'm happy to go into it. But for now, I'll just say, wrong:

1) A CPU replacement is not the way to effectively upgrade your computer performance.

2) There are valid reasons why one CPU can't simply be exchanged for a faster one.

Then the video brings up the flat screen monitor versus the big, "ugly" CRT monitor issue. Again, she missed some major advantages of the flat screen:

A flat screen monitor is smaller (takes a lot less space on the desk)

It's lighter (makes my job easier when installing or moving)

And, wait for it - A flat screen monitor **USES LESS ENERGY** than a CRT. I'm surprised how someone would still think the big CRT is just part of a planned obsolescence program, when the flat screen has so many advantages.

Neither of these issues - the CPU or the monitor - is planned obsolescence. At worst, call this unplanned obsolescence due to technological advances. Perhaps a more understandable comparison would be a car: Annie Leonard is saying that because my car from ten years ago doesn't have the same performance as a modern car, it must be the fault of planned obsolescence on the part of the car company! I disagree.

She did talk about fashion, about how media ads make us unhappy with what we have, and try to get us to buy, buy, buy. I do have some nitpicks about some of the details (contextual advertising is helpful, in my opinion), but for the most part I agree with what she said.

A couple of other points she made that forced me to raise my eyebrow:

"National happiness is declining"

Systems Thinking and Sustainability

...Need more info, please. I looked for stats on this after the video ended. Didn't find them. I have a hard time believing this statement, since we have less disease; people are living longer, et cetera.

"The average house size has doubled since 1970"

I live in a house that was built in 1960. It's a good size (1250 square feet). But I really doubt the average house size these days is 2500 square feet. It depends on what market and income levels you look at, of course. I'm guessing you can pretty much make the "average" house size be anything you want.

DISPOSAL

Incineration is really bad. I agree.

Recycling helps by reducing disposal costs... Really? Over the cost of a landfill? From a straight money-savings equation, I would think that landfills would be the way to go. I agree that some recycling (aluminum and some metals) is good, but not all.

CONCLUSION

We have, according to The Story of Stuff, a "system in crisis". Our planet, and what we're doing to it, sucks. We're in big trouble.

I know I was rough on my review of The Story of Stuff. But I agree on some points - people are abused in our current system. Waste (of time, resources and money) is encouraged. But the system we have in place - with its horrible problems - also brings with it a lot of good stuff, too.

In my opinion, The Story of Stuff seemed to be too biased - ignoring some issues or misrepresenting others. While I think it would be great to have "a system that doesn't waste resources or people... sustainability, equity, renewable, local living economy..." I think we'd have to give up a lot of things to make that happen. Things that make our life better.

Instead of ditching our current system, here's an idea: why can't we try instead to modify our system and improve it, make it more closer to the ideals, which most people agree upon?

Annie Leonard said some naysayers would call her ideas "unrealistic, idealistic, they can't happen". I wonder if those same people - or Annie Leonard herself - would say the same about mine?