

Why Having Stuff Matters: A Fresh Perspective

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Abstract

For this assignment, students will explore their values on Consumption and Consumerism by looking at what people “consume” in different cultures and through reading and writing about the economic and environmental costs of consumption. This is a unit designed for students in upper-intermediate ESL Reading and Writing classes and will incorporate practice in reading comprehension, summary, critical thinking, discussion and basic essay writing.

Introduction and Overview

Many international students really enjoy shopping in the US. The goal of this activity is to broaden students’ awareness of the economic and environmental impacts of shopping (i.e. consumerism) and to use English to read about, discuss and write about them. Students in Level 5 of the Intensive ESL Program are in their last quarter of ESL before college. This unit will help prepare them for the higher-level academic work they will have to do in college by helping them to take a step away from personal writing and by integrating reading and writing skills. Students will spend 2-3 weeks working on this and it will serve as the end-of-term culminating project for these classes. It is hoped that, after students have completed this unit, they will become more conscious shoppers who also have the English vocabulary to express their thoughts about it!

Activities

Week 1: Students will keep a log of everything they buy for seven days.

Week 2: Students will share their logs in class and discuss what they bought and why they bought it.

Introduce *Material World* with a brief text summing up what the book is about. Students will work in groups to compare 2 photos from the book. They will discuss the similarities/differences they observe, and each group will give a short presentation to the class.

Class discussion: what are the values reflected by the things you observed in the photos? What conclusions can you make from what you see?

Reading assignment from the Nova Website (brief descriptions of several families featured in the book).

Journal reflection writing: How do my lifestyle and values about material things compare to one or two of the families pictured? What seems important to them, to me?

Week 3: Watch the video *The Story of Stuff*. Follow-up with student reactions, comments, etc. Teacher introduces the book *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things*.

Students read an excerpt from *Stuff* (about “Shoes”); vocabulary work, comprehension questions, reading.

Students write a summary of the text they read and write a personal response to it. In class, they will share their responses to the text with classmates.

Students will choose a second selection from *Stuff* and read it on their own.

Class discussion with questions about their response to the video and text, how it might relate to them, what it tells them about their consumer habits and how they could change their “shopping” behavior.

Culminating Essay Assignment--could be compare/contrast, cause/effect, or argument essay. Students will develop their own topic related to the video, reading and discussions and reflections they have worked with.

Assessment:

Students will be assessed on each assignment in the skill areas of vocabulary and reading comprehension, summary, critical thinking, discussion and basic essay writing.

Resources:

Lewis, Susan K. "NOVA | World in the Balance | Material World |." *PBS. Nova*, Apr. 2004. Web. 5 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/worldbalance/material.html>>.

Menzel, Peter. *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1994. Print.

Ryan, John C., and Alan T. Durning. *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things*. Seattle, WA: Northwest Environment Watch, 1997. Print.

Stuff Curriculum and Resource Guide. Sightline Institute. 2000. Web. 17 Feb 2009. <http://www.sightline.org/publications/books/stuff/stuff_curriculum.pdf>.

The Story of Stuff with Annie Leonard. Web. 13 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.storyofstuff.com/>>.