

Teachers' Support Purchasing and Waste

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Introduction

Purchasing is about making sound/effective choices about qualitative and quantitative aspects of buying things. Purchasing in a broader sense is connected to the social and economic phenomenon of consumerism, which may be defined in the negative as the chronic purchasing of new goods and services, with little attention to their true need, durability, product origin or the environmental consequences of manufacture and disposal. Indeed, it has been said (author unknown) that consumerism means: "You work in a job you hate, to buy stuff that you don't need, to impress people that you don't like." Some of these negative consequences of purchasing – both social and environmental – are leading more and more people to suggest that there must be a better way to organise our societies / world. OCC explores aspects of our purchasing behaviours.

Waste is something we all produce as part of everyday living but perhaps don't normally think too much about ... Increased consumption results in greater waste both directly from disposal and indirectly from production processes. OCC explores aspects of waste in our society.

Student Activities - Purchasing

For a selection of additional student activities, click on

Student Activities – Purchasing (& Consumerism)

For an example of a lesson plan integrating three learning areas and values click on:

Integrated Lesson Plan This lesson plan is for *Mission Earth Master Chef*.

Student Activities - Waste

For a selection of additional student activities click on:

Waste and Litter Student Activities and **Waste and Litter Teacher Notes**

Waste and Litter Extension Activities

The Waste Audit

Definition and Types of Waste

Definition - What is Waste?:

Waste, commonly called rubbish or garbage, is something we all produce as part of everyday living but perhaps don't normally think too much about. There are many definitions that are used to describe waste as material that is no longer used or needed or perceived to have no value. Waste often ends up in landfill if it is not socially, environmentally or economically viable for it to be reduced, reused or recycled.

Waste is all material not wanted by the person or persons whose activities produce it. (Statement of Strategic Direction for Waste Management in Western Australia, September 2004.)

Increased consumption results in greater waste both directly from disposal and indirectly from production processes. Most solid waste generated in WA ends up in landfill sites. Poor waste management practices at landfill sites can lead to land contamination and pollution of surface and groundwater resources. Landfill sites also generate methane, a major greenhouse gas, and litter problems. Landfill fires are also potentially environmentally damaging and may generate potentially toxic fumes. Communities living adjacent to landfill or waste treatment facilities can be particularly anxious about potential health effects arising from accidents or poor management practices.

Types of Waste:

Waste is classified into either organic (living) or inorganic (non-living). Organic waste is anything that was or is living including garden waste (eg. leaves, grass clippings, branches, hay, flowers, woodchips and bark), food waste (eg. fruit, vegetables, tea, bread, cereals, eggshells, grains, meat and dairy products) and other (eg. paper, animal hair, faeces, vacuum cleaner dust, hair, wool, wood ash) (green waste).

A survey undertaken by the Australian Food and Grocery Council in 2003 found that Australia wastes about 2.2 million tonnes of food annually, or 13% of total food consumed (Australian Food and Grocery Council, 2003). This equates to the annual food consumption of nearly 3.2 million Australians. (State of the Environment Report WA 2007)

Inorganic waste includes plastics, glass, aluminium and other metals, materials such as sand and bricks and hazardous household waste.

Organic waste can be recycled by using it as mulch, composting or through a worm farm. Inorganic waste can be reduced (or avoided), reused or recycled.

For further information on waste from an Australian perspective click on:

[A History of Waste - the Australian View](#)

Litter is anything that is left where it's not meant to be. Litter is usually waste. Various aspects of litter are addressed including:

- Definition – What is litter?
- Litter in Western Australia
- Litter in your school
- Stormwater and marine litter
- Laws about littering

This information about litter can be accessed by clicking on:

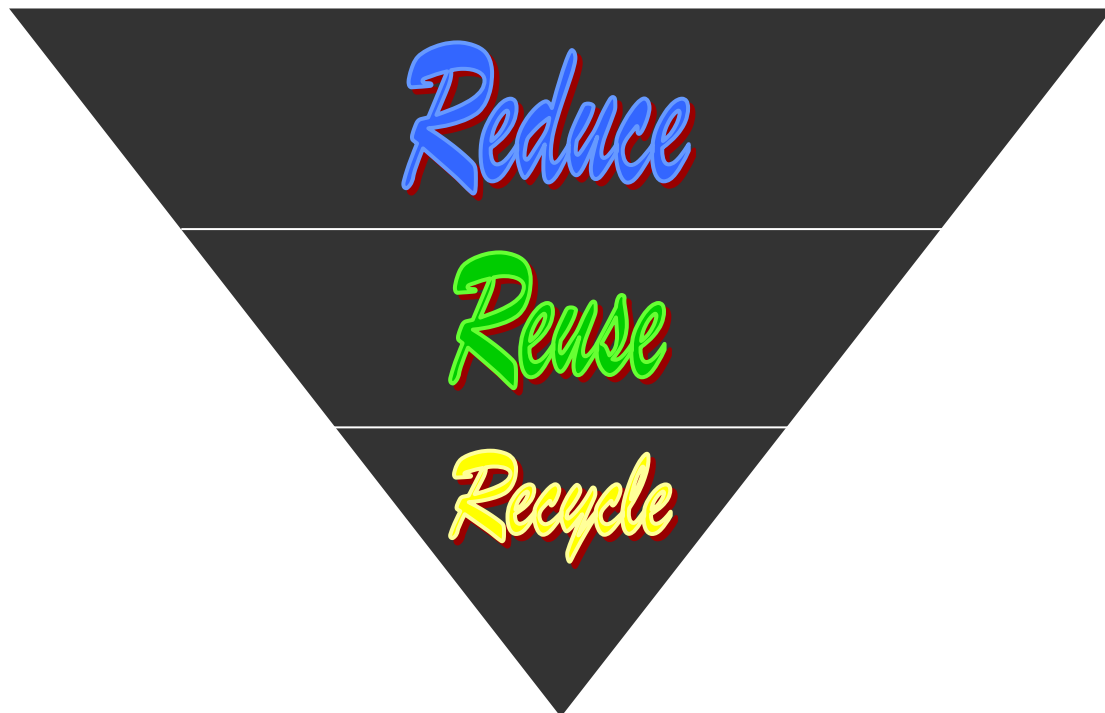
[Information on Litter](#)

The 3Rs - Reduce, Reuse and Recycle

The '3 Rs' are important as we reduce the amount of waste going to landfill and save money, energy and resources that would otherwise have been used to make a new product. It also means that if it becomes a habit to reuse items students may be less likely to simply throw things away.

Waste is a growing problem in Australia. Each year Australians recycle more, but also create more waste as the population grows and consumption increases. By following the 3Rs, it is possible to dramatically reduce the waste we produce.

The 3Rs are listed in order of importance: first reduce, then reuse and finally recycle what is leftover. The first priority must always be to reduce the amount of rubbish produced



Reduce means to create less waste in the first place so that there is less rubbish that might become litter or go to landfill, and potentially reduce waste disposal costs.

Reuse means to use the same item repeatedly or even to find another way to use them, such as buying refills or using old jars to store other items.

Recycle means to return a waste item to a factory where it can be made into another of the same product or something different. For example, recycled aluminium cans can be made back into cans or into engine blocks for new cars.

The 3 Rs should occur in this order with initially reducing our waste being the most important step in waste and litter minimisation. Although recycling is a far better option than creating new materials, it is even better to reduce and reuse items where possible.

Did you know?

- 20 recycled aluminium cans can be made with the same amount of energy required to make one new can from raw materials.

Purchasing and Consumerism: What is wrong with Consumerism?

Definitions

There is a clear distinction between purchasing and consumerism. Purchasing is about making sound/effective choices about qualitative and quantitative aspects of buying things which may not readily be linked to consumerism per se.

Furthermore there are many positives associated with purchasing including the provision of essential goods and services to people.

“Consumerism is the equating of personal happiness with the purchasing of material possessions and consumption” (Wikipedia). Consumerism may also be defined in the negative as the chronic purchasing of new goods and services, with little attention to their true need, durability, product origin or the environmental consequences of manufacture and disposal.

Understanding Consumerism

Consumerism interferes with a sustainable and just society by replacing the normal common-sense desire for an adequate supply of life's necessities, community life, a stable family and healthy relationships with an artificial ongoing and insatiable quest for more and more possessions and the money to buy them, with little regard for the true utility of what is bought. An *intended consequence* of this, promoted by those who profit from consumerism, is to accelerate the discarding of the old, either because of lack of durability or a change in fashion.

Marshall Plan (USA) – a recent history of consumerism:

“Over the past two or three decades, the (marketers) have seized on the primal desire for authentic identity in order to sell more gym shoes, cars, mobile phones and home furnishings.....The yearning that we feel for an authentic sense of self is pursued by way of substitute gratifications, external rewards and, especially, money and material consumption” (from the essay, “What’s Left?” Clive Hamilton, Quarterly Essay, 2007, p.41, Black Inc., Feik, C. Editor).

Unfortunately many people become used to the *intrusion of advertising into their consciousness* in the form of television or print advertising so they fail to protect themselves, or worse, their children from being seduced by consumerism “Advertising long ago discarded the practice of selling a product on the merits of its useful features. Modern marketing builds symbolic associations between the product and the psychological states of potential consumers, sometimes targeting known feelings of inadequacy, aspiration or expectation, and sometimes setting out to create a sense of inadequacy in order to remedy it with the product” (Hamilton p.41). Convinced that their self worth is based on \$200 athletic shoes or designer clothing, children are already on the road to spiritual dissatisfaction and resentment as well as a perception of diminished self-worth. When they become adolescents they are probably not going to be happy or productive even were they provided with an endless supply of things that few parents could afford. As Hamilton points out, products and brands can never give true meaning to human lives, so consumers “lapse into a permanent state of unfulfilled desire” (p.42).

Consumerism supports inbuilt and perceived redundancy.

Inbuilt redundancy: Products are made with inbuilt redundancy so that we replace it frequently. “In-built redundancy is something we now associate with a vast range of products we regularly use and then discard. But with a growing global population always needing and wanting more, how can this throw-away and-replace mentality continue?” (<http://www.uts.edu.au/new/speaks/2007/August/1608.html>)

Perceived redundancy: Products are made psychologically obsolete long before they actually wear out. A generation is growing up without knowing what quality goods are. Friendship, family ties and personal autonomy are only promoted as a vehicle for gift giving and the rationale for the selection of communication services and personal acquisition. Everything becomes mediated through the spending of money on goods and services.

Consumerism Today

We generally associate consumerism with the Western world, however it is multi-cultural and non-geographical as is evidenced in major cities all over the world today. Consumerism, as in people purchasing goods or consuming materials in excess of their basic needs is not new. Some of the very early civilisations such as those in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Rome were examples of societies driven by the need to accumulate possessions. Over the last century, however, and particularly since the Second World War, consumerism has become very, very widespread. For a brief history of consumerism in the Western World, reasons for over-consumption global impacts of consumerism, together with facts and figures, click on:

History of Consumerism in the Western World

We live in an affluent, developed country in which many Australians live very comfortably. Consumerism and over-consumption has become a way of life for many Australians who would seem to confuse needs with wants. It is not enough to simply own a home – it must be bigger and have all the “stuff” like bigger car(s), bigger televisions, all the latest gadgets, air conditioning, dishwashers, home theatres and the list goes on.

It has been said that Australians are suffering from a sustained bout of “affluenza” (Consumerism, Volume 258, *Issues in Society* edited by Justin Healey). This book asks “Has materialism gone mad, or are we just becoming more conscious as consumers?” and also examines such issues as “ethical consumption” – how our consumption of luxury items impacts on the lives of people in developing nations and the environment.

“Today’s consumption is undermining the environmental resource base.... (and) if the trends continue without change.....today’s problems of consumption and human development will worsen” (*Behind Consumption and Consumerism* by Anup Shah, <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumerism.asp?p=1>)

Some of the things, Anup Shah identifies as needing to change are:

- the redistribution from high income to low income consumers
- shifting to cleaner goods and production technologies
- promoting goods that empower poor producers
- changing from consumption for conspicuous display to consuming to meet basic needs

Inequality of Consumption

The inequality between rich and poor consumers is stark. Globally, the 20% of the world's people in the highest income countries consume 86% of total private consumption expenditures. The poorest 20% consume 1.3%.

This is illustrated in the following table

Commodity	Consumption by wealthiest 20%(1/5 th) of the world's people	Consumption by poorest 20% (1/5 th) of world's people
Meat and Fish	45%	5%
Total energy	58%	< 4%
Total number of telephone lines	74%	1.5%
paper	84%	1.1%
World's vehicle ownership	87%	< 1%

Information derived from *Human Development Report 1998 Overview – United Nations Development programme (UNDP)*

Consumption growth in the last 60 years is impacting on the environment like never before, and data from the World Bank in 2003 would indicate that the figures above have changed little. (Anup Shah)

Another comparison which highlights the stark differences between wealthy and poor countries and the priorities of consumerism is as follows:

Global Priority	\$US b spent	Global priority	\$US b Extra required
Cosmetics in USA	8	Basic education for all	6
Cigarettes in Europe	50	Water and Sanitation for all	9
Narcotics worldwide	400	Reproductive health for all women	12
Military spending worldwide	780	Basic Health and nutrition	13

Source: *The State of Human Development United Nations Development Report 1998, Chapter 1, p37.*

Other global spending priorities (in \$US Billions) which could be compared as above (1998 report) and to which students can relate are:

Ice Cream in Europe	11
Pet food – Europe and US	17
Business entertainment in Japan	35
Alcoholic drinks in Europe	105

Impacts of Consumerism on Australians and the Student's Role

In Australia, we consume a variety of products and resources beyond those to satisfy our basic needs. Our consumption includes luxury items, and technological innovations designed to make life easier or to improve efficiency. This has happened throughout history and the desire to improve our lives is not of itself a bad thing. We are not saying to students that they should be living as their ancestors did 200 years ago, when the differences between the wealthy and educated, and the poor and illiterate in all countries was even greater.

What we do need to question, and to encourage the students to seriously think about, are the important issues around consumerism. Some of these include:

- How the products and resources we consume are actually produced
- What impacts that production process has on the environment, society or individual
- What items are necessities and what are luxuries
- How consumption changes as society changes
- What or who are influences on our consumption choices
- Businesses and advertisers must promote the consumption of their products to ensure their profitability and survival. How much of what we consume is influenced by their needs rather than our own?
- How do the demands for certain items affect the requirements placed on the environment
- What impact do the demands of wealthier countries have on the poorer nations and people.
- What is the impact of material values on relationships between people
(Reference: Anup Shah)

There are many other questions your students may raise, but we can see that the impacts of consumerism - good and bad - are very significant to our lives and our planet. It is important to consider also the underlying system which promotes certain types of consumption over others.

The Student's Role:

"It is important when discussing Climate Change with your students to emphasise that individual actions and people affect the global story. Raising the awareness of Climate Change with students is more than presenting the facts about warming temperatures, atmospheric composition and rising sea levels. It is absolutely essential that our students identify themselves as part of the process and identify with it or they will not be willing to change "The goal of education for global responsibility must be to give each child a continuing sense of his or her value and responsibility as a part of (their) larger contexts" (*Education for global responsibility*, in Moser and Dilling, p.281).

"If the key to learning is doing, then the key to doing is to let the students plan more of it on their own. Oh, you can share the map and introduce some tools for the adventure, but they'll have to have the experience for themselves."
Mapbearers, Toolkeepers, Starmakers A Speech by Steve Van Matre

Your students will hopefully take the understandings they have gained, and the desire to adapt their behaviours, home to their families and so enthuse a wider group to embrace behaviours and make choices which are more sustainable, less wasteful and fairer to all.

Further reading:

Students could be referred to the following website:

<http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption.asp>.

To read more about or research other aspects of this topic, such as

- Children as Consumers
- Effects of Consumerism
- Tobacco

- Obesity
- Sugar
- Beef
- Bananas
- Wasted Wealth, Capital and Resources

Behind Consumption and Consumerism by Anup Shah

Conscious Consumerism is seen by the Australian Zoo Wildlife Warriors to be perhaps the most important element in relation to habitat conservation and wildlife protection – “This means that conservation is not just about what we actively DO; it is also what we choose NOT to do or buy that makes a difference. Click on: http://www.wildlifewarriors.org.au/conscious_consumer/index.html

It is people actively refusing to purchase items which are damaging to the environment which is vital to ensuring that the work of anti-poaching patrols, vets, wildlife warriors and other conservation workers are successful in defending the future of the world’s threatened species.

These are some of the measures Australian Zoo recommends:

- **Don’t** buy products containing endangered species. In particular, be aware of traditional Asian souvenirs and medicines containing body parts of tigers or other endangered species.
- **Don’t** buy furniture made from illegally logged hardwoods such as teak or mahogany. Only buy wood products from sustainable or recycled sources.
- **Don’t** support companies that directly damage the environment or support activities that destroy habitat. Only deal with ethical companies.
- Put our planet first and profits second.
- **Don’t** remain silent. Speak out against environmental abuse and unethical practices. Remember, poverty and human suffering goes hand in hand with environmental issues.

Other ways schools can address purchasing issues:

Reflect on:

- the *qualitative* element of purchasing e.g. through fair trade purchasing, purchasing goods that are made from recycled/re-used products, etc, and
- the *quantitative* element of purchasing e.g. through minimising packaging, ‘do I/we really need this questioning?, employing re-use strategies, etc.

... thus the link between purchasing and waste!