

Teaching about Consumption and Sustainability

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Abstract:

This article presents a curricular-based experiential exercise designed to encourage behavioral shifts in college students' consumption habits. We describe the Not Buying It Project in which students refrain from purchasing nonessential items for a specified period of time then reflect on and analyze their experiences. Data gathered from students in three sociology courses taught in Florida (USA) show that students' consumption habits changed and their motivation to decrease consumption was sparked with this simple exercise. We also explore the challenges associated with pedagogical exercises that encourage sustainable consumption, as well as the importance of and implications for teaching about consumption and sustainability in post-secondary institutions.

Key Words:

Consumption, Sustainability Education, Experiential Learning, Hyper-consumerism.

Introduction

Among our most important jobs as educators is to provide students with a better understanding of current issues that plague our world and to encourage a sense of civic responsibility to address these problems. Indeed, such learning is at the core of a liberal education (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2011). Arguably, one of the most pressing issues facing us is environmental devastation, which can be traced, in no small part, to overconsumption of natural resources. At its core, overconsumption is linked to cultural expectations surrounding consumerism, what has been described as the “new consumerism” or even hyper-consumerism--the excessive purchasing and use of resources that far exceed human needs (Schor, 1998). Consumption has been linked to sustainability and the concept of sustainable development since the original Brundtland Commission report (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) that addressed the need to meet the current population’s basic needs without endangering the prospects of future generations. However, the “consumption problem” has often remained on the sidelines of policy prescriptions, entering the discussion “only obliquely as in calls for ‘green consumption’ or the moral imperatives of recycling” (Conca, Princen, & Maniates, 2001, p. 1). As long as the material economy continues to grow and economic reasoning continues to inform the dominant framework of public policy in the U.S., consumption is isolated from critical analysis. As a result, the public does not question whether society would be better off without its current consumption habits and the strain on biophysical resources continues to grow.

Although sustainability efforts must occur at multiple levels, we agree with Savageau (2013) that the classroom is a site where such change can and does occur. Educating students about hyper-consumerism that characterizes contemporary Western culture can raise awareness of consumption and sustainability, encourage a more critical perspective on consumerism and environmental concerns, and ideally effect social change (e.g. reduce consumption). In this paper, we discuss an experiential exercise designed to encourage behavioral shifts in consumption habits. We present data gathered from three sociology courses taught in Florida (USA) that show students’ motivation to decrease consumption is increased with this simple exercise.

Literature Review

Consumption in America

The United States leads the world in overconsumption. According to FacingtheFuture.org, a not-for-profit organization that provides schools and educators with curriculum on environmental issues and sustainability, the United States accounts for less than five percent of the world’s population but one third of all consumption. It would take the resources of three planets for everyone on Earth to live as people do in the U.S. The discrepancies between consumption patterns of American citizens compared to persons in other parts of the world are striking. The average American’s “ecological footprint,” which is the amount of land and water needed to support one’s lifestyle, is 9.7 hectares, far above the global average of 2.3 hectares (Wackernagel,

Schulz, Deumling, Linares, Jenkins, Kapos, Monfreda, Loh, Myers, Norgaard, & Randers, 2002; WorldWatch Institute, 2010).

Consumption is constrained by income and many college students have limited resources. Compared to most Americans, young people in the U.S., including traditional college students, are not major consumers—yet. Data from the Consumer Expenditure Survey (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014) show that persons under age 25 (data specific to college students are not available) spend less, on average, than any other age group. Many live on campus, do not own a car, and if they work, they are likely to earn minimum wage. In fact, young adults have the lowest reported incomes, according to the Consumer Expenditure Survey (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Nonetheless, they *do* consume, even though the purchased items may not be expensive, and even if it means going in debt. As Carr, Gotlieb, Lee & Shah (2012) found, contemporary young adults (Generation X) are more willing than older generations to splurge on products that make them look good (i.e., achieve status), spend at high levels and acquire debt.

In order to shape a more sustainable future, we believe it is important to teach students about hyper-consumerism and sustainable consumption *before* they have the financial means to become fully immersed in our postmodern consumerist culture (Schor, 1998). Although education and awareness alone are not sufficient for solving environmental problems related to sustainable consumption, they are key. UNESCO (2014) has highlighted sustainable consumption as one of the key issues for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and has promoted the inclusion of these issues in the classroom as a way to empower learners to change their behavior. In this paper we demonstrate how the lessons learned from a simple class project result in shifts in students' consumption habits and their motivation to decrease consumption. This classroom exercise can help students become more conscious citizens who are better prepared to deal with socio-environmental issues and crises.

Teaching about Consumption and Sustainability

There are surprisingly few classroom exercises designed to teach students about overconsumption and its link to sustainability, although such activities appear to be effective. Alvarez-Suarez, Vega-Marcote, and Mira (2014) perform a pre-test, intervention, and post-test procedure to see how behavior can change when individuals are introduced and educated on sustainable consumption practices. This type of knowledge enhancement proved to be a major factor in improving not only awareness of environmental problems tied to the ecological footprint but also attitudes toward these issues. One pedagogical approach from cultural and critical studies—*critical pedagogies of consumption* (Sandlin & McLaren, 2010)—focuses on how individuals are educated to become consumers. As Denzin (2010, p. xiii) notes, “Educational institutions produce gendered, classed, and racialized subjects—subjects whose identities are forged out of exchanges in the consumer marketplace.” Sandlin and McLaren (2010) encourage educators to take consumption seriously and to educate students to resist consumerism. Sandlin and colleagues' (Sandlin, Kahn, Darts, & Tavin, 2009; Sandlin & McLaren, 2010) unique approach to teaching students about consumerism employs art, and comedic and theatrical performances in public spaces such as malls, traffic stops,

retail stores, and churches, to increase discomfort and dissonance so that one learns how “to exist in ambiguity, where there are no scripts determining one’s life, where people are free to create rather than to just consume” (Sandlin et al., 2009, p. 108). Other studies have emphasized assessment activities in distance learning courses and teacher interventions to increase the awareness of sustainable consumption when teaching trainees (Alvarez-Suarez et al., 2014).

In our discipline, sociology, there has been some effort to raise awareness of consumption among students. Juliet Schor, author of *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer* (Schor, 1998), asks students to reflect upon their own consumption habits by having them write an essay on “what type of consumer are you?” (Schor, 2010). Dowell (2006) asks students to collect their garbage for a 24-hour period and bring it to class for analysis and discussion. Obach (2009) has students document their own consumption over a three day period, and take the “ecological footprint quiz” online to get a sense of their overall consumption global impact. Finally, Christiansen and Fischer (2010) travelled with students to various cities to compare and contrast sustainable policies and local initiatives. While traveling, students participated in “green” initiatives such as riding public transportation, bicycling, eating locally grown and served foods, visiting green businesses, and speaking to policy makers about the sustainable efforts in their communities. These researchers report positive outcomes from these exercises. Students showed increased awareness about global environmental issues (Dowell, 2006; Obach, 2009), and their own consumption habits (Obach, 2009). Christiansen and Fischer (2010) also report changes in behavior. For example, some students began major sustainability projects after completing the course including initiating campus-wide composting efforts and working with city planners to explore alternative transportation options.

For instructors who teach about consumption, a primary goal is helping students make the connection between their personal habits (e.g. recycling; hyper-consumerism) and larger social issues (e.g. environment impact). But most exercises that focus on environmental impacts also have as a goal, whether acknowledged or not, change in students’ behaviors and actions. That is, these exercises are intended to change students’ current habits and attitudes, and in effect, teach sustainability and social responsibility. According to Hironimus-Wendt and Wallace (2009, p. 78) “social responsibility implies an affective sense of connection to others in the community (empathy), and more importantly, it implies a sense of responsibility to others.”

Efforts to encourage students’ social responsibility are not likely to be achieved with traditional pedagogical methods (Nilson, 2010). Experiential learning, what Dewey (1938) refers to as learning by doing, is better suited for such learning outcomes. As Kolb (1984, p. 42) argues, “The simple perception of experience is not sufficient for learning; something must be done with it.” Kolb (1984, p. 52) proposes that “learning occurs through the active extension and grounding of ideas *and* experiences in the external world and through internal reflection about the attributes of these experiences and ideas.” The exercise presented here is grounded in Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory by incorporating concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation, and active experimentation in order to produce greater knowledge. This exercise is also in keeping with Dewey’s (1938) notion of a

“progressive education” in which experience and learning are intimately connected. Not surprisingly, experiential learning has been found to be effective at helping students see the connection between their own lives and larger social forces, and encouraging a sense of social responsibility (Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace, 2009).

Guided by these pedagogical traditions (Dewey, 1938; Kolb 1984), we developed the *Not Buying It Project* which allows for the grounding and extension of ideas, reflection and active experimentation. The exercise has been shown previously to be effective in creating awareness of hyper-consumption (Grauerholz & Bubriski-McKenzie, 2012) but we were also interested in motivating students to change behavior. Here we report on evidence that the *Not Buying It Project* can indeed shape students’ behaviors. We also explore the challenges associated with pedagogical exercises that encourage sustainable consumption.

The Not Buying It Project

As sociologists, we teach students about social problems, including environmental degradation. But topics such as environment, climate change, or sustainability seem like large-scale issues, having little to do with individual agency and actions. We have found that simply lecturing and discussing these issues may result in enhanced comprehension but do little to challenge individual habits. In addition, in an introductory course, environment and/or consumption is only one topic among many so the amount of time we are able to devote to the topic is limited. For these reasons, we wanted to develop a short-term, experiential exercise that would make the topic more real to students. Exercises reviewed above (Dowell 2006; Obach 2009; Christiansen & Fischer, 2010) were not do-able given institutional and time constraints (e.g. there would be no way to dispose of the waste generated by a large class). Seeking a simple exercise that would nonetheless be effective in changing attitudes and behaviors led us to develop the *Not Buying It Project*. The *Not Buying It Project* is a simple exercise that can be implemented in classes of any size.

In our classes, students refrained from shopping for everything except essentials for 3-7 consecutive days. Students began by reading Judith Levine’s (2006) *Not Buying It*, an autobiographical account of a year when Levine refrained from buying all but necessities. Levine’s decision to refrain from buying came as an epiphany as she was slogging through slushy ice with countless other New Yorkers during Christmas shopping:

So as I squeeze into a seat between two members of a wet, overstuffed, and ketchup-smelling family of Christmas shoppers, a vision appears to me.... I conjure emptiness—no slush, no family, no ketchup. No credit cards, no shopping bags. No shopping. (Levine, 2006, p. 6).

Unlike Levine (2006), our students were required to refrain from buying for only 3-7 consecutive days (depending on the course), not a year. But similar to Levine (2006), even a few days can produce a heightened awareness of just how much stuff we own, how every aspect of our lives is entangled with consumption, and how difficult it can be to jump off the consumption-wagon when everyone around you is barreling down that road.

We told our students that they could not purchase anything nonessential during this period and if they did, they were required to justify the purchase. We suggested categories of items which may be considered nonessential (coffee, alcohol, clothes, movies, etc.) but we insisted that students define essential for themselves. Two students insisted that coffee was essential because withdrawal from their caffeine-addictions would cause physical symptoms that would prevent them from completing school assignments (in this case, they decided to significantly cut back on how much coffee they consumed). Asking students to define essential items had the effect of forcing students to question purchases they had always taken for granted (one student, for example, questioned whether people use more toilet paper than needed). Making even small changes in consumption habits can be challenging, therefore we focused on daily or near-daily purchases (e.g. gas, entertainment) rather than monthly expenditures (e.g. rent, Internet service).

The project was used toward the end of semester in three introductory sociology courses as part of a broader discussion about the environment and global inequalities. This topic spanned two class periods, during which the instructor lectured about consumption patterns and students viewed a film titled *The Story of Stuff* (www.storyofstuff.com) that provides a structural and global perspective on hyper-consumption. For this and virtually all topics covered throughout the course, we encouraged students to reflect on ways in which their attitudes and behaviors are shaped by larger social forces. The *Not Buying It Project* was one of the papers students had the option to complete that semester.

During the project, students kept a journal or blog of their experiences and insights; participated in online discussions; and wrote a short paper in which they described what they did, what they learned (about themselves, the environment, cultural consumption) in the process, whether and what changes they hoped to make in the future and why or why not. Students' grades were based on whether they demonstrated evidence that they took the project seriously and their insights into personal and societal consumption rather than whether they actually succeeded in not purchasing any nonessential items. The paper was worth just 2.5 percentage points in a large class and as much as 20 percent in a small, honors class. Although students in the honors class, who were required to write longer papers, provided deeper insights than those in the other two classes, we were surprised by how engaged students were, even in the low-stakes assignment.

Data and Methods

We have used this assignment in three *Introduction to Sociology* courses, one of which was an honors course. All were taught at the same university, which is classified as large, HU (high undergraduate) and RU/H (research university with high research activity) (www.carnegiefoundation.org). Course enrollments for the three courses were 12 (honors), 22 and 187. The courses were taught by the same instructor using similar teaching methods for each. It is important to note that in the large course (187), students were given the option to do an alternative assignment. In this course, 55 students completed the *Not Buying It Project*, bring the total across all three courses to 89. Table 1 provides a breakdown by course and type of data collected.

Table 1: Types of Data Used to Assess Outcomes

Course Title	Overall N
Introduction to Sociology-Course 1 (honors)	12
Introduction to Sociology-Course 2	22
Introduction to Sociology-Course 3	55*
Data Source	Overall N
Journals and papers	89
Short Essays	77
Posttest	55
* 187 students were enrolled students, 55 participated in the <i>Not Buying It Project</i>	

In our study, we measured decreased consumption, or intent to decrease consumption, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Data collection varied slightly across courses, in part to adapt to different course structures and also from our efforts to improve assessment. Data for assessing effectiveness and student learning outcomes came primarily from students' writings. Students who completed the *Not Buying It Project* submitted daily journals, online discussion posts, and short papers ranging from 300-2500 words in length. In all, we content analyzed writings from 89 students. We also attempted to measure long-term change by following up with students via email 6-8 weeks after the course was completed. Given the very low response rate (33%) and difficulty with follow-up, we only did this for the small class (N=12). We qualitatively analyzed students' writing using a line-by-line coding process outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). We first coded all responses that pertained to change in consumption patterns, whether during the project or in the future. Next we conducted focused coding, looking for subthemes related to decreased consumption and relationships among these.

In addition to the qualitative data, students in the large class completed a short questionnaire created by the authors after the lesson on consumption that included a question about how motivated they were to reduce consumption. Options range from 1 = *I am extremely motivated to decrease my spending/consumption*, 2 = *I am somewhat motivated to decrease my spending/consumption*, 3 = *I am not motivated to change my spending/consumption*, 4 = *I am somewhat motivated to increase my spending/consumption*, to 5 = *I am extremely motivated to increase my spending/consumption*.

Findings

When students were asked on the questionnaire how motivated they were to decrease spending/consumption, 85 percent the students who completed the consumption project reported that they were "extremely" or "somewhat" motivated to do so. About 13 percent reported no change in motivation. Interestingly, about three percent said they were motivated to *increase* consumption/spending. Although we did not ask students to elaborate on their answers, one student provided valuable insight

during class discussion. This student, a self-proclaimed “greenie” who visits land-fills, doesn’t own a car, and re-gifts whenever possible, stated that she decided after completing the project that she was going to lower her thermometer 2 degrees (in summer) because she realized just how frugal she has been and decided she deserved some pampering. Her comment provided an opportunity to explore other dimensions of consumption, including how being a conscious consumer does not necessarily require depriving oneself of all pleasures, and questions surrounding what constitutes needs versus wants/ preferences and who should or can define needs of others (Hakansson, 2014).

The qualitative analysis of students’ writings revealed deeper insight into students’ awareness of hyper-consumerism in general, their own in particular, and a desire to modify future behavior. First, it is important to note that even though most students do not have the means to be hyper-consumers (while fewer than 6% stated that they struggled to buy the basics, the majority suggested that they could afford to buy little extras but struggle to afford big extras such as travel or nice clothing), they appear to have tendencies toward overconsumption. While many purchases are small things such as Frappuccinos, beer, earrings, or shoes, these purchases seem to be largely impulsive. Consider the following student who describes her spending habits:

I learned that I make a lot of impulsive purchases...I mainly consume because I am so busy. This also doesn’t make much sense...because I have less time to make purchases....However the online marketplace has captured my attention...Even if I’m pressed for time and cannot make it out to the mall, I will buy a pair of shoes or earrings online...Another reason why I consume is because of loyalty cards and programs....Now I make purchase all the time to gain \$10 off my next purchase or to reach Premier status....I am in debt due to my lifestyle [earlier the student noted that she owed \$1000 on her American Express card that she wasn’t able to pay off]. I look through my outstanding credit card transactions, and not one purchase was a necessity... (Course 3).

Several of the students wrote about financial debt or struggles they were currently having also talked about making impulsive purchases. As one student candidly put it: “Although I may not earn a salary, I sure spend money like I do” (Course 3). Many are also emotional shoppers, as suggested in the following excerpt:

I love the feeling of brand new clothes and having cute shoes...I love fashion and I love to see what’s in style. I see signature pieces every season and try to find the cheaper version. I go shopping and look for the sales and bargains. Yet when I look around someone always looks better dressed than me. I find myself again trying to better my wardrobe....All the pretty girls have the best clothes and I want them too. The sad part is that it doesn’t seem like enough... (Course 3).

These students, like many Americans, consume to excess and often without much thought to why or what implications these purchases will have on their finances. Changing these students’ behaviors, even for a few days, can be challenging. We did find evidence that students’ behavior changed, not just during the project, but beyond. For instance, although not required, several students took additional steps towards learning about consumption or going beyond the required number of days for the

assignment. In the following excerpt, a student describes how the project resulted in serious evaluation of personal spending:

I absolutely want to make changes to my consumption habits and I found an awesome website to help me do so. It's called mint.com and it's a secure financial planning website that shows you how much money (amount and percent) you spend on different areas of your life: rent, gas, food (fast food, restaurants, groceries), entertainment, home supplies, and so much more. I've found I spend way too much money on fast food, which I'm going to try to cut out entirely. I'm also researching different ways to reuse things that may be broken or old, like clothes or shoes. I am very dedicated to this change, so I think I'll surely be able to do it. I think my biggest challenge will be controlling my social spending. My friends are very important to me, but I'll find some other way of entertaining us all that doesn't involve so much consumption" (Course 2).

Another student commented:

I do think that this project will change my consumption habits. It is said that it takes fourteen days to break a habit. I am going to continue as if I was still engaged in the project for the remaining ten days (Course 2).

Many students realized that they could make small changes, and seemed committed to doing so. Most of these changes surrounded food and beverage consumption. Many students noted that they planned to eat out less, use reusable water bottles, and pack their lunches. For example:

I have made a conscious decision not to buy plastic water bottles anymore. I know this is a permanent change I can manage... This section [of the course] has motivated me to get involved and try to do something to at least help fix our waste problem. I just can't sit back and watch anymore now that it has become self-evident that I am involved. I refuse to let humanity shop 'til it drops' (Course 2).

Some students seemed committed to decreasing spending in part because they saw the immediate impact on their wallets:

I will take this exercise and try to continue on with it for a while yet. I see how it has helped me financially, especially, when I do need it most, and I believe the benefits will outweigh the inconvenience of eating at home and getting regular gas. Perhaps, if I continue with this I will be able to help others through donations or financially, because of all the extra money I will have. This exercise was by far the most beneficial assignment we have done in this class (no offense) (Course 3).

We also attempted to follow-up with students in the honors course about six weeks after the course was completed to see what types of changes they had made. Although the response rate was low (33 percent) we were encouraged by responses we did receive:

I've definitely continued to try to spend less money, and to contribute less to consumption, and I've decreased from my old amount and kept it that way, but

I've consumed more than I did during the project. I've also convinced my family to start recycling and to try to save water, etc.

I haven't really thought about consumption since the end of the semester, but I haven't bought as much as "normal." I have tried to buy more in bulk, and use less plastic packaging. I also bought a lunch box to help reduce the waste I produce (Course 3).

As these comments from students' writings indicate, learning and change occurred through a process by which abstract concepts and ideas were grounded in experience and reflected upon (Kolb, 1984). Many were committed to making changes in their consumption habits after participating in the exercise because they gained greater awareness of consumption and sustainability, and understood both the personal and social benefits of doing so. We hoped that this project would raise enough awareness so that students would exercise more caution in terms of their spending and reduce consumption but some students were clear that they didn't plan to make it permanent:

I know that what I consume is not excessive in comparison to some because I really do not have the resources to be an outrageous consumer, but if I could, I would.... I would love to have a massive supply of top name brand clothes because outward appearances are very important especially where I am from (Course 3).

While qualitatively analyzing students' writings, we discovered an important theme: reducing consumption is viewed as deprivation. Many students talked about the project in "diet" terms: "Sadly, I *failed* at the absolute last second of the day..." (Course 3); "I have done pretty well...with *resisting economic temptations*..." (Course 3); "Good thing I started this thing today and not yesterday so I got to *splurge* a little bit and go out before going on '*probation*'..." (Course 3); "I really feel like *cheating* on this assignment right now but I know I would feel worse if I did..." (Course 3); "I don't know that I can fully finish this day. I may have to *cheat* and stop a little early..." (Course 3). Similarly, when students successfully resisted spending, their language conveyed a sense of pride and accomplishment similar to the dieter who resisted a piece of cake. Yet, as we know, diets fail, and if students approach the project (and sustainability more generally) with this mentality, they are not likely to enact permanent lifestyle changes. This realization has helped us consider different ways to approach the topic of consumption in future classes, perhaps addressing this association directly and emphasizing what is gained, not sacrificed, when we become more discerning consumers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings suggest that the *Not Buying It Project* helps students see their own consumption in a new light. In particular, qualitative analysis and students' self-reports suggest that the exercise was generally effective in motivating them to decrease consumption. Given students' already limited consumption, it might be argued that an exercise such as *Not Buying It* is ineffective. Yet, we believe heightening individuals' awareness of consumption *before* they have the means to buy, literally, into consumer culture can have a profound effect on future behaviors. We did find evidence that the exercise motivated students to decrease consumption; whether such awareness and

commitment translate into long-term future consumerist habits is unknown. Like much ethical or life-long learning, it is difficult to assess such outcomes.

Our goal was to produce a transformative dialogue within the classroom surrounding issues of consumption. In many ways, consumption is an ideal topic for doing so because consumption is universal; multi-dimensional (economic, political, social, moral, personal); and it has important implications for individuals, communities, nations and the planet. The *Not Buying It Project* encourages students to reflect critically about their own consumption behaviors and actions, and ideally leads them to become more conscious consumers. An important part of such a dialogue and transformative learning is to explore with students the complexities and broader issues surrounding consumption. These discussions are most productive when they occur after students have participated in the exercise so that they have a concrete experience upon which to reflect. Here we suggest ways instructors could broaden discussions about consumption and sustainability in order to enrich the lessons students take away from this exercise.

It is important to keep in mind that the ultimate goal is to help students become more conscious, informed consumers and therefore more conscientious citizens. Even though some have argued that “the most powerful and immediate mechanism we as individuals control is to *not* consume” (Black, 2012, p. 403), it is not the only way to achieve greater sustainability. Our approach of asking students to reduce consumption is just one strategy but it is important to discuss with students what it means to them to be conscious consumers and better citizens, and how these values can be best realized. They may not necessarily choose anti-consumerism, although this is certainly one option; perhaps they decide to boycott certain companies or engage in “buycotting” by choosing products that lead to more sustainability. The point here is not to limit students’ agency but to encourage deeper reflection upon how they feel they can be most engaged in sustainability efforts.

Reduced consumption is an incredibly difficult life-style change. In fact, Isenhour (2010) found that even among individuals who were committed to sustainable living, the most challenging change was to “stop shopping” (p. 460). In our short-term reduced-consumption exercise, students expressed feelings of deprivation and frustration. Class discussions could center on why reducing consumption is so difficult, which can help students understand how consumption is not just economic—it is social. Several of our students expressed concerns that their friends would be angry with them if they didn’t participate in social activities, all of which involved consumption (e.g. going for a beer or coffee, seeing a movie, going shopping). Other students said they had no idea what they would do with their time if they didn’t engage in consumption. These conversations can lead to powerful realizations. One student discovered that she needed to be more creative in socializing with friends so rather than meet for lunch as usual, they met in a park. The experience, she noted, was more fun. It is helpful to students if sustainable consumption can be framed in positive rather than negative terms. Helping them see how, “when it comes to socially conscious consumption, private benefits and public benefits are homologous” (Atkinson, 2012, p. 204), can be powerfully transformative. Several students were pleasantly surprised to find that they had saved money during

the project. In other words, they saw that reducing consumption is for their *own* good as well as for the planet.

But is simply not buying stuff the solution? Ask students to consider what would happen if consumption drastically declined. Since the global community depends on Americans' (and other Westerners') habits to sustain their own jobs and standards of living, what would happen if society as a whole significantly decreased consumption? Not only would this shift have implications for workers around the world, but it wouldn't necessarily result in sustainability either. As Durning (1992) powerfully notes,

...the opposite of overconsumption—destitution—is no solution to either environmental or human problems. It is infinitely worse for people and bad for the natural world too. Dispossessed peasants slash-and-burn their way into the rain forests of Latin America, hungry nomads turn their herds out onto fragile African rangeland, reducing it to desert, and small farmers in India and the Philippines cultivate steep slopes, exposing them to the erosive powers of rain" (Durning, 1992, p. 23). There are no easy answers to the question of how we can ensure greater sustainability but exploring these issues with students can help them think more broadly about consumption, globalization and sustainability.

Instructors may wish to examine the often conflicting cultural messages students receive about consumption. Scientists and environmentalists may voice a cautionary tale about the role consumption plays in environmental devastation but students are more likely to hear messages from government and culture at large that consumption—and lots of it—is good, as those who remember leaders telling the public to go out and shop in response to the attacks on September 11th can attest. Students may also hear messages encouraging “green” consumption to ensure a sustainable future. As children growing up, this generation of college students may have been largely aware of environmental issues, but most books and TV shows stressed solutions involving recycling and the consumption of eco-friendly products, all individualized solutions to a global problem (Maniates, 2001; Seyfang, 2005). The dissonance between awareness of global environmental problems and individualized solutions presents a puzzle that leaves many students in a state of confusion. Exploring these contradictory messages can broaden students' understandings of how social systems operate and the role individuals play within these larger structures. In doing so, students gain insight into how their lives are affected by larger social forces and how they, too, play a role in sustaining social structures.

There is a related question to consider here, and that is whether teaching students about their own individual consumption and persuading them to reduce consumption makes any real difference in the world. The question of individual agency when it comes to global issues such as sustainability is an important part of the larger dialogue. Some argue that emphasizing individual change does not adequately address environmental systemic issues that are complex and require change in policy and institutional level practices (Stern, 2000; Kransy & Roth, 2010). For example, Gardner and Stern (2002) point out that the mass offenders of environmental degradation are large corporations and government, not individuals. Thus, the focus of much environmental education has shifted to “capacity building” that promotes collective action through structural awareness to create pro-environmental government and industry change (Gardner &

Stern, 2002; UN Economic and Social Council, 2006; Kransy & Tidball, 2009). Using the *Not Buying It Project* or any other classroom exercise without also teaching about structural and global problems and solutions would be ineffective and misleading; students must learn about these larger structural issues in order to make sense of their individual experiences with consumption and what relative good they can do as individuals. This discussion might include an exploration into cultural (as well as scholarly) assumptions about individual versus collective action. Traditionally, individual action has been conceptualized as ineffective whereas collective action is seen as capable of effecting social change but more recent scholarship suggests that consumers are active, not passive, and that individual consumption choices are important personally and globally (Thorson, 2012; Willis & Schor, 2012). This is not to suggest that individualized solutions to a global problem alone are sufficient, but to discount individual agency is misleading and likely disempowering to students. It is critical that students do not come away from the lesson believing that the actions of one will solve the sustainability problem but nor should they believe that their individual actions are ineffective. Of course, instructors might wish to stress collective action and its power to effect change. Students could brainstorm ways to engage in collective action and possibly design a service-learning project to promote more conscious consumption in their communities (e.g. develop a campaign to reduce waste on campus).

Sustainability education is challenging but highly rewarding for instructors and students. It is an opportunity to explore complex questions that have personal and global consequences. We have found that the complexities surrounding consumption can enrich class discussion and help students grapple with the impacts of their actions on society at large and to consider sustainability from a larger perspective. What is clear to us is that the experiential aspect of the exercise is absolutely essential in getting students to rethink consumption and sustainability. Without this component, knowledge stays abstract and an opportunity to help transform students' understandings of the world and their place within it is missed. The *Not Buying It Project* is simple yet effective in bringing these issues to light and creating a transformative dialogue within the classroom.

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