

America's Mass Over Consumption

By: Melissa Dix

Over consuming is something that Americans do very well. It has become part of our culture. Many fast food restaurants do not offer a small drink anymore; it is medium, large and extra large. No one thinks twice about someone having up to twenty pairs of shoes. There is even a commercial that makes light of the fact that the person is "in debt up to his eyeballs" because of his large house, new car, and membership to the exclusive golf club and all he has to do is apply for a home consolidation loan he will be just fine. It seems that the trend is even moving outside of the United States. According to the United Nations Development Program "Global spending on advertising, which stimulates consumption, multiplied nearly sevenfold from 1950 to 1990, when the total was \$257 billion, or \$48 for each person on the planet. It has nearly doubled again since then (1999), to \$435 billion, and is increasing faster than incomes or population, especially in developing nations." ⁵ Students need to understand that there is a problem and they can help become part of the solution.

Did you know that Americans, who make up only five percent of the world's population, used nearly a third of its resources and produced almost half of its hazardous waste. ⁴ How consciences are you of America's mass over consumption of resources? Take this short quiz to test your consumption quotient. ³

1. The percentage of Americans calling themselves "very happy" reached its highest point in what year?

- a. 1957
- b. 1967
- c. 1977
- d. 1987

Answer: a. The number of "very happy" people peaked in 1957, and has remained fairly stable or declined ever since. Even though we consume twice as much as we did in the 1950s, people were just as happy when they had less.

2. How much of an average American's lifetime will be spent (on average) watching television commercials?

- a. 6 months
- b. 3 months
- c. 1 year
- d. 1.5 years

Answer: c. In contrast, Americans on average spend only 40 minutes a week playing with their children, and members of working couples talk with one another on average only 12 minutes a day.

3. Which activity did more Americans do in 1996?

- a. graduate from college
- b. declare bankruptcy

Answer: b. In 1996, more than 1 million Americans declared bankruptcy, three times as many as in 1986. Americans have more than 1 billion credit cards, and less than one-third of credit card holders pay off their balances each month.

4. In the industrialized world, where is the U.S. ranked in terms of its income equality between the rich and the poor? (First being the most income-equal.)

- a. 1st
- b. 5th
- c. 12th
- d. 22nd

Answer: d. The income disparity between the rich and the poor is greatest in the United States.

5. Since 1950, Americans alone have used more resources than:

- a. everyone who ever lived before them
- b. the combined Third World populations
- c. the Romans at the height of the Roman Empire
- d. all of the above

Answer: All of the above. Since 1950, Americans alone have used more resources than everyone who ever lived before them. Each American individual uses up 20 tons of basic raw materials annually. Americans throw away 7 million cars a year, 2 million plastic bottles an hour and enough aluminum cans annually to make six thousand DC-10 airplanes.

6. Which president feared that untamed American capitalism might create a corrupt civilization?

- a. Jimmy Carter
- b. Ronald Reagan
- c. Theodore Roosevelt
- d. Abraham Lincoln

Answer: c. President Theodore Roosevelt feared that allowing American capitalism to develop unleashed would eventually create a corrupt civilization. He was a strong proponent of simple living.

7. Of the Americans who voluntarily cut back their consumption, what percent said (in 1995) that they are happier as a result?

- a. 29 percent
- b. 42 percent
- c. 67 percent
- d. 86 percent

Answer: d. Eighty-six percent of Americans who voluntarily cut back their consumption feel happier as a result. Only 9 percent said they were less happy. In 1996, 5 percent of the "baby boom" generation reported practicing a strong form of voluntary simplicity. By the year 2000, some predict this number will rise to 15 percent.

This quiz is the opening activity for a lesson on consumerism in America.^{2h} This should get students interested in the topic. After the quiz the class creates a KWL chart. This is a chart to write down what the students already **know** about consumption and consumerism. The students should have some knowledge of consumerism because of television ads. Next the teacher writes down what the students **want** to know, and the list can be added to as the lesson goes on.²ⁱ At the end of the lesson, the class writes down what they have **learned** by completing the activities.

To start the lesson the students read Janet Tashjian's book *Gospel According to Larry*. This book is about a 17 year old boy named Josh who only wants to make the world a better place. He creates a website under the pseudonym of Larry and gives sermons on anti-consumerism. One of the things pointed out on the website is that Larry only has 75 personal possessions, including socks, underwear, keys, etc. One of the activities while reading the book is for the students to go home and count how many personal possessions they own. This will give them a baseline for where they stand on over consumption.

The next activity is a video that PBS created to teach about over consumption in a fun and humorous way. The video, called *Affluenza*, is a one-hour television special that explores the high social and environmental costs of materialism and over consumption. This video has ties to several different subjects including Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Economics.

Now that students have generated questions, through the book, KWL chart and the video, it is time for them to start finding answers. To do this the students will take one issue that they find interesting and research it.^{1b} The issue can come from one of Larry's sermons, the *Affluenza* video, or it can be a question of their own.^{2b}

With the classroom teacher's assistance the media specialist has already created a pathfinder that contains good websites, magazines, books and other media on the problem of over consumption.^{1c 1e} Creating pathfinders is one of the best ways a media specialist can help a classroom teacher.^{1a} This makes it easy for students to research their topic with reliable resources.^{1f} This can also help students because the pathfinders can be geared to the students reading and understanding level.^{1g} The students will mainly be left alone to do their research,^{1h} with the classroom teacher and media specialist walking around making sure students are on task.^{1d} They will also be available in case anyone has questions or experiences difficulty.

Once students have completed their research they will create their own sermon on the topic they have researched.^{2e} These sermons will be one page in length, contain a persuasive argument, and contain at least two references. A rubric will be provided for the students so they know exactly what is expected from them.^{2a}

As a culminating activity the class will divide into groups of 3 to 4 students. Each group will create a webpage that contains their sermons.^{1i 2c} The students will use a webpage design program to create their webpage.^{2d 2j} This webpage must contain each student's sermon, but it can also contain photo's, music, poetry, or anything else the students feel represents their view of over consumption and how to make a change.^{2f} This webpage will be sent out to the rest of the school and it will be available for parents to view.^{1j}

To finish the lesson the class will go back to the KWL chart and fill in what they have learned from this lesson. This review is helpful for students to see the accomplishments they have had with the lesson because they get to see how much they have learned. This promotes a sense of accomplishment in students and hopefully encourages life long learning.^{2g} Once students learn how much American's consume and the effects it has on our society and societies around the world, they will hopefully make some changes in their lives. These changes will make their future a better place to live.

If you would like more information on over consumption, here are some good websites to visit.

<http://www.thegospelaccordingtolarry.com>

The official Gospel According to Larry website

<http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/>

PBS's website promoting their Affluenza video. This also has fun facts and solutions.

<http://www.unfpa.org/6billion/ccmc/consumptionandresources.html>

Facts on America's consumption of resources

1. ALA and AECT, *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*, 1998.
 - a. Principle 1
 - b. Principle 2
 - c. Principle 3
 - d. Principle 4
 - e. Principle 5
 - f. Principle 6
 - g. Principle 7
 - h. Principle 8
 - i. Principle 9
 - j. Principle 10
2. Callison, Daniel, *Key Words, Concepts, Methods for Information Age Instruction: A Guide to Teaching Information Inquiry*, 2003.
 - a. Key Idea-Assessment
 - b. Key Idea-Constructivism
 - c. Key Idea-Cooperative Learning
 - d. Key Idea-Creative/Inventive Thinking
 - e. Key Idea-Critical Thinking
 - f. Key Idea-Individual Differences
 - g. Key Idea-Meaningfulness and Motivation
 - h. Key Idea-Problem and Project-Based Learning
 - i. Key Idea-Questioning
 - j. Key Idea-Technology
3. <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/diag/what.html>
4. <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/show/about.html>
5. United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1998* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 5; Alan Durning, "World Spending on Ads Skyrockets," in *Vital Signs 1992* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993) found at <http://www.unfpa.org/6billion/ccmc/consumptionandresources.html>