Title of Lesson: Consumer Confusion: Wants versus Needs and Gandhi’s Wisdom

Lesson By: Mary Condron

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
<th>Class Size:</th>
<th>Time/ Duration of Lesson:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4 / Social Studies</td>
<td>15 – 25 children</td>
<td>Approximately 3-5 days; 60 minute sessions</td>
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Goals/ Objectives of Lesson:
- Students will prepare graphs to illustrate the different levels of consumption throughout the world with complete accuracy.
- Students will examine wants and needs and share their observations in group discussions.
- Students will distinguish between wants and needs in their own lives, consider Gandhi’s opinion on material possessions, and record their thinking in journal reflection.

Lesson Abstract:
In Gandhi’s seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*, he asserts that men “are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money can buy.” This lesson is designed to introduce fourth grade students to the idea of consumerism through an examination of their own wants and needs. Students will examine their own possessions and then learn more about the range of numbers of possessions held by people throughout the world. Activities include sharing books, class discussion, creating graphs, examining advertising, and journal reflection.

Lesson Content:
Gandhi wisely tells us that, “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need, but not every man’s greed.”(1) Gandhi’s mission was not so much to free India from British rule, but to transform society. His seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*, explains in detail his condemnation of modern civilization which he characterizes as too focused on bodily welfare and as neglecting the soul. He asserts that men “are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money can buy.”(2)

E.F. Schumacher agrees with Gandhi in his book, *Small is Beautiful, Economics as if People Mattered* (1973). He argues that, despite popular opinion, the “foundations of peace cannot be laid by universal prosperity, in the modern sense, because such prosperity, if attainable at all, is attainable only by cultivating such drives of human nature as greed and envy, which destroy intelligence, happiness, serenity, and thereby the peacefulness of man.”(3)

These are profound thoughts that students, even at elementary school age, may begin to consider in the context of a study of Gandhi. Gandhi believed that truth was the heart, the “god”, of all. According to Gandhi, both personal spiritual growth and national welfare depend upon a passionate commitment to truth. We can easily see that truth, or what is “right”, will not allow some individuals to have more than they need while others are hurting because they do not have the basic necessities. Furthermore, Gandhi maintains that wealth beyond need is corrupting to the soul. Gandhi felt that the single minded focus on material comfort of western culture would lead to its downfall, and certainly should not be emulated by India.
Consumerism can be defined as purchasing goods and consuming materials in excess of basic needs. It is not a new phenomenon. It is as old as civilization, however it has become widespread only in the last century.

The United Nations’ Human Development Report – 1988, published fifty years after Gandhi’s death, stated this: “Today’s consumption is undermining the environmental resource base. It is exacerbating inequalities. And the dynamics of the consumption – poverty, inequality, environment nexus are accelerating. If the trends continue without change – not redistributing from high income to low income consumers, not shifting from polluting to cleaner goods and production technologies, not promoting goods that empower poor producers, not shifting priority from consumption for conspicuous display to meeting basic needs – today’s problems of consumption and human development will worsen.”(4)

Indeed they have worsened. Consider that in 2003 the World Bank reported the 20% of the world’s people that live in the highest income countries account for 81.5% of total private consumption expenditures, and the poorest 20% account for only 3.6%.(5) Although First World countries clearly have the lead in unchecked consumerism, other countries are eager to follow this lead. The New York Times Upfront reported in 2004 that, “A sizzling economy remakes India: shopping malls, technology, and Western-style consumerism are transforming the nation of Gandhi.”(6) In this article, author Amy Waldman reports that young Indians are eager to take on the trappings of middle class with new jobs and opportunities that have appeared since 1991 when India began to open the economy by reducing red tape, lifting restrictions on foreign investment, and, in other ways loosening the grip of state control. According to Waldman these are largely positive changes and are widely embraced by Indians benefiting from increasing incomes. She does acknowledge, however, that India’s per capita income was still only about $480. Nowhere does she respond to Gandhi’s thinking that this soulless pursuit of material wealth can hardly be considered progress.

For Gandhi, economics and ethics were related. He did not accept the idea that material wealth and bodily comfort should be the goals of life. He saw simplicity as essential to spiritual enlightenment, which was the path to contentment for the individual. Restraint in pursuit of material gain was also important for the larger community, for if some individuals have more than they need, others necessarily then, would not have what they need. Gandhi believed that the moksha, or salvation, of an individual soul was necessarily tied to the community. He said “I am not my brother’s keeper, I am my brother.” Gandhi advocated what he called, trusteeship. Trusteeship is designed to promote a relationship among men whose interests might seem to be in conflict. Trusteeship is not about expropriation, taxation, or charity. It is about individuals being responsible for their own lives as well as for the lives of their neighbors. It is to be a mutual responsibility. Gandhi believed that economics must be centered on justice. A society that preaches the value of wealth and material gain is causing great harm to individuals and leads to destruction of the society.

Sadly the marketing of a consumer culture and a preoccupation with status symbols is directed squarely at our youth. Children are taught early and taught well that to have the biggest and newest of everything is to be cool, to be loved, and to be happy. Children are deliberately misled about wants and needs by pervasive advertising and even by well-meaning parents who
confuse the two themselves. Gandhi warns us that wealth and happiness do not go hand in
hand. In *Hind Swaraj* he writes: “We notice that the mind is a restless bird, the more it gets the
more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions the more
unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgence. They saw that
happiness was largely a mental condition. A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich, or
unhappy because he is poor.”(7)

One of Gandhi’s intentions in writing *Hind Swaraj* was to teach Indians that colonialism itself
was not the greatest problem facing their nation. In fact, it was “modern civilisation” that posed
the real threat. As Anthony Patel explains in the Introduction to *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi’s
contemporaries seemed to view “modern civilisation” as an unmixed blessing, but Gandhi
believed that it was “not the British that are responsible for the misfortunes of India but we who
have succumbed of modern civilization. . . The key to an understanding of *Hind Swaraj* lies in
the idea that worldly pursuits should give way to ethical living.”(8) Gandhi wanted his
countrymen to understand the beauty in their ancient civilization. “It is an attempt to see beauty
in voluntary simplicity, (voluntary) poverty and slowness. I have pictured that as my ideal.”(9)

Gandhi’s ideal is a complete opposite of the ideal we seem to pursue in modern American
culture, an ideal promoted by advertising and grounded in a seemingly unquestioned belief in
the power of money and possessions.

In can be argued that the unchecked promotion of consumption by capitalistic countries has
done some good. Journalist Bill McKibben points out that global capitalism has lifted living
standards throughout much of the world. We enjoy longer lives, improved nutrition, and better
education because capitalism has successfully solved the problem of “how to make things
grow”. Capitalistic consumerism has made improvements that would not have been made by
embracing what McKibben describes as the Gandhian way, “Share. And don’t want so much
anyway.”(10)

But as McKibben goes on to explain, we have created new and much bigger problems with our
mindless growth. We have dramatically altered the earth’s delicate balance in alarming and
perhaps catastrophic ways. We have created gross inequalities in access to basic necessities for
the world’s people. Our growth is simply not sustainable. Our acceptance of the dollar as the
“bottom line” is a blind and suicidal approach to living.

And so it seems that Gandhi’s seemingly quaint and “backward” ideas about possessions and
national economics may be the most forward thinking of all his teachings. More today than
ever, we need to consider Gandhi’s admonishments regarding western civilization. Even
children can recognize the truth about our unreasonable quest for more and more material
comforts and status symbols, though it will take honest reflection to acknowledge the heavy
influence of media and peer pressure in their own lives and to draw the line between wants and
needs.

23.
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Florida State Content Standards:

- Social Studies - Economics 1.2.1: The student understands that all decisions involve opportunity costs and that making effective decisions involves considering the costs and the benefits associated with alternative choices.
- Social Studies - Economics 1.2.2: The student understands that scarcity of resources requires choices on many levels, from the individual to the societal.
- Math - Data Analysis and Probability 1.2.1: The student solves problems by generating, collecting, organizing, displaying, and analyzing data using histograms, bar graphs, circle graphs, line graphs, pictographs, and charts.

Guiding Questions: (major questions your lesson will address)

- What do I really need?
- What did Gandhi believe about possessions?
- What is a fair price to pay for the things I want?

Materials Needed: (list any materials needed for this lesson- e.g., art supplies, LCD projector)

- Book: Material World: A Global Family Portrait by P. Menzel, C. Mann, and P. Kennedy
- Handout on consumption around the world (See Attachment)
- Graph paper, chart paper, drawing paper, pencils, markers
- Magazines, especially those aimed at young teens

Lesson Context: (how this lesson may fit into a larger unit of study; how you will include the digital story you create):

It will be helpful for students to have some familiarity with Gandhi and his role as a world leader prior to this lesson.

Students should have prior experience with graphing and determining appropriate intervals for graph scales.

Teaching Activities: (describe methods or strategies used to teach content)

Ask students to prepare for upcoming lesson by cleaning out their desks and recording everything inside. Teacher can do this as well, though this may take a good deal longer!

Keep student lists and post at beginning of lesson.

1. INTRODUCTION:
Show photograph of Gandhi’s few possessions at the time of his death. (Available at www.cbu.edu/Gandhi and also included at the bottom of Lesson Attachment.) Make a list of these and post to compare with class lists. Ask students to infer what Gandhi believed about possessions. Share ideas.

Share with students that Gandhi believed having more than you needed was harmful to the person and to the community. Ask students why Gandhi might think this way. Share ideas.

Explain that people who have so much may even begin to confuse their wants and needs. Have students try to categorize items from their desks as “wants” or “needs”, and the teacher can do the same.

Read aloud the book portions of A Life Like Mine which beautifully illustrates our human needs. Ask students to work collaboratively in small groups to create definitions for wants and needs. Share and discuss as a class trying to reach a group consensus on definitions.

2. AROUND THE WORLD

Explain that there is a wide variety in the number of possessions people own and that the kinds of items that could be deemed as needs vary with the culture. Share with the students some of the illustrations in the book, Material World. Some photographs from the book are also available online at www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/worldbalance/material

Ask students to draw from memory, all of their family’s possessions in a fanciful array in the front of their house in the style of the book.

Students create a T chart to classify items 20 items from their drawings as Needs or Wants.

Each child then selects only one from each list to present to the class to create a class T chart. As each child adds one want and one need to the chart, he or she explains her thinking to the class.

DISCUSSION

As a class discuss the class chart of Needs and Wants. Discuss differences of opinion if they exist.

Again explain that there is a wide variety in the consumer habits of people around the world. Explain that data you have found data on this and students can help us to analyze this information by creating graphs. Distribute worksheet with consumption information from countries around the world. (See Lesson Attachment.) Students work collaboratively in small groups to create a graph to illustrate the information. Teacher should monitor work as it progresses and inaccuracies should be corrected.

Examine these graphs and the photographs from previous work. What does this data suggest
about our values? Are people’s needs and values different in different places? Ask if the needs of a Mali family might be different from an American family. Might the one family NEED a car while another does not? Why do you think some countries consume so much more than others?

4. ANALYSIS

Post class chart of wants and needs. Discuss the needs to be sure that all necessities are included. Then lead students through the following simulation:

Each pair of students will represent a country of the world, though the country need not be named. For simplicity, assume that each country has the same number of people: only 10.

For simplicity, assume that each item on the class chart of wants and needs costs the same amount to purchase: $1 per person.

Determine how much money will be available by multiplying the number of items on the needs list by the number of “countries” and again by 10 (because there are 10 people in each country.) Note that this amount of “world money” is enough to provide all the world’s people with everything they need. Announce that you are going to add some extra money so that there will be money available for some of the items on our list of wants, and add approximately 20% more to the total. Now take the “world money” and randomly give each “country” an amount of money, some countries receiving a lot of money and some very little.

Each “country” now decides how to spend their money with the given goal of making life as nice as possible for the people of the country. Each item on the needs and wants list will cost $10 to purchase it for all the people of the country. Students will consider how much money they have been given and will have to make decisions prioritizing the lists of wants and, possibly, of needs.

Each “country” writes their spending plan on large paper to post of the class to examine. Do not suggest that richer countries share with poorer countries, but if it is suggested tell students it is up to them to decide what they can do.

As a class examine the posted spending plans and discuss. What do we know about the values of each country based upon their spending plan?

Explain that the problem of buying too many wants is not only that poorer people are left out. Consumerism is costing us a great deal more than we might think because using so much is harming the environment. Ask the “rich countries” if they might change their spending plans if every dollar spent on their “wants” polluted our water or killed an animal whose home was destroyed.

5. WRAP UP
Post Gandhi’s quotations: “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need, but not every man’s greed.” and “Renounce and enjoy!” Discuss the meaning of his statements.

Students write a reflective journal entry asking themselves what their possessions mean to them. What possessions are most important to you? Is it easy or hard to tell the difference between what you want and what you need? Do you think Gandhi was right or wrong when he said that having more than you need is not good?

Assessment/ Evaluation:
Students will receive credit for completing collaborative graphs accurately, participating in discussions regarding wants and needs, and for completing a journal reflection on the topic of their own wants and needs.

Teacher will informally assess the success of the activities by the sincerity and depth of thinking regarding the topic as shown in class discussion and journal writing.

Extension Activities/ Enrichment:
Ask students to examine magazines for advertising. Students work collaboratively to create collages of ads that advertise products that are needs versus wants. Display student work and examine the ads. Are they different for the two types of products? How do the ads for “wants” try to entice you to want the product? Do you “buy into” this?

Students work in teams to create an ad (print or act out a radio/TV ad) for a completely worthless gadget.

This lesson introduces the idea of advertising by appealing to emotion. It is not designed to teach students to identify different advertising tricks, but subsequent lessons or independent study projects could be designed to do so.

Parents who have an interest in this topic could be invited to come and share with the class how they try to diminish their wants and simplify their lives.

Students can make soups and other dishes from simple community grown fruits, seeds, and vegetables.

Students can sponsor a collection for Salvation Army, or a similar organization. They can collect and donate unneeded items from their homes.

Consider Gandhi’s idea that simplicity was the road to personal contentment rather than having more things. Create a class book of SIMPLE PLEASURES with each student contributing one page describing a simple and inexpensive way to have fun and enjoy life.

Bibliography:

The Culture of Peace versus Materialism and Consumerism: Indira Gandhi National Centre for
the Arts, New Delhi. www.ignca.nic/cd


M.K. Gandhi Institute. www.cbu.edu/Gandhi


Sustainable Settlement in Southern Africa. www.sustainablesettlement.co.za


APPENDICES
CONSUMERISM AROUND THE WORLD

Choose one of the following topics and create a graph using the data provided.

1. Sustainable Development
Sustainable development is defined as meeting the needs of the present in such a way that we will be able to meet the needs of the future as well. Our ecological footprint is the amount of space needed to sustain the lifestyle of each person. This includes cropland, grazing land, sea area to produce seafood, and land areas needed to produce the other things we need. Below are the footprints for a few countries (1997).

Ecological Footprints Around the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Footprint in hectares</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>10.3 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>5.9 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>3.2 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1.2 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>0.8 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>0.5 ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World average footprint</td>
<td>2.85 ha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Resources Institute, 1997
www.sustainablessettlement.co.za/issues/resources.html

Hint: A bar graph is good for making quick comparisons.

2. Children’s Purchase Influence

Children’s Influence on Parent Buying

1965 (1960’s): Children directly influenced about $5 billion of parent purchases

1975 (1970’s): Children directly influenced about $20 billion of parent purchases

1985 (1980’s): Children directly influenced about $50 billion of parent purchases

1990: Children directly influenced about $132 billion of parent purchases

1997: Children directly influenced about $188 billion of parent purchases


Hint: A line graph is good for showing how things change over time.

3. Comparing consumption of rich and poor
Globally, the 20% of the world’s people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures — the poorest 20% only account for 1.3%.

The richest consume 45% of all meat and fish. (More than their share)
The poorest consume 5% of all meat and fish. (Less than their share)

The richest consume 58% of total energy.
The poorest consume less than 5% of total energy.

The richest have 74% of all telephone lines.
The poorest have 1.5% of all telephone lines.

The richest consume 84% of all paper.
The poorest consume 1.1% of all paper.

The richest own 87% of all vehicles.
The poorest own less than 1% of all vehicles.

Source: Human Development Report Overview, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 1988
http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption.asp

Hint: A Circle graph is good for showing percentages. Pictured below is a circle divided into ten equal parts, and each part represents 10%. You could copy or trace this circle or you could make your own circle divided into 10 equal parts. You’ll need one for each circle graph you want to make. To represent 87%, you would shade 8 “slices of the pie” and almost all of another slice to show nearly 90%. To represent 1% you would shade a thin part of only 1 slice to show only 1% (or 1/10 of 10%).

4. Global Spending Choices
### WHAT CONSUMERS CHOOSE TO BUY:

**How much we spend on:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>$U.S. Billions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetics in the United States</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice cream in Europe</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfumes in Europe and the United States</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet foods in Europe and the United States</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business entertainment in Japan</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarettes in Europe</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcoholic drinks in Europe</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcotic drugs in the world</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military spending in the world</td>
<td>780</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### WHAT CONSUMERS DON’T BUY

**How much it would cost to purchase:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>$U.S. Billions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic education for all</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water and sanitation for all</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic health and nutrition</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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

Hint: A bar graph is good for showing comparisons. The challenge on this graph will be to choose the best interval for your scale because there are such different amounts of money.

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Famous photograph of all of Gandhi’s possessions at the time of his death.

![Famous photograph of Gandhi’s possessions](http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption.asp)