



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 7 to 12
About the Author: Matthew Johnson, Director of Education,
MediaSmarts

Buy Nothing Day

Overview

In this lesson Buy Nothing Day is used as a jumping-off point to look at the role of consumerism in our lives and culture. Students learn the definition of consumerism and consider its benefits and drawbacks; as well as where and how they receive consumerist messages. Students list their own recent purchases and consider how many were *needed* as opposed to *wanted*. They are then introduced to Buy Nothing Day and discuss its purpose and merits. Finally, students imagine that Buy Nothing Day is a holiday on par with Christmas and plan either a pageant or television program to celebrate the event.

Note: the *Consumerism Diary* activity is distributed to students the day before this class.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Define and debate the pros and cons of consumerism
- Survey consumerist messages in their lives
- Analyze their own purchases
- Plan a pageant or television program

Preparation and Materials

Read and photocopy the following handouts:

- *Buy Nothing Day*
- *What I Buy*
- *Consumerism Diary*

If you would like more background on Buy Nothing Day, read the backgrounder at http://www.buynothingday.co.uk/?page_id=2.

Procedure

For all students:

The day before, distribute the handout *Consumerism Diary* and ask students to fill it out for this class.

What is consumerism?

Write the word *consumerism* on the board and ask students if they know or can guess what it means. If no-one is familiar with it, break it into two parts for them: *consumer*, someone who purchases and uses a product or service, and *ism*, an organized way of thinking (compare *communism*, *feminism*, *pragmatism*, etc.) Develop a definition of consumerism with the class that is similar to this one: *consumerism is the belief that it is good for society for people to buy things – the more, the better*. Ask students if they agree with this idea or not. What are some arguments in its favour? (Example: people work to produce things; they need buyers to keep their jobs) What are some arguments against it? (Example: people may waste their money buying things they don't need.)

Ask students what things in our society encourage us to believe in consumerism. Try to encourage students to come up with several examples (advertising, hearing or seeing what other people have bought, disposable products, etc.) Ask students if there are any rituals or holidays that encourage consumerism; if no students suggest them, point out that birthdays, Christmas, Hanukkah and Easter all involve buying presents or treats. Ask students to consider their own religious or cultural celebrations. Is there an emphasis on buying presents in any of them?

Consumerism Diary

Take up the *Consumerism Diary* handout from the previous day with students. What kinds of messages did they receive that encouraged them to spend? Which places and media were most likely to contain consumerist messages? Were there any places or media that had few or no consumerism messages? Discuss why some places and media are better or worse venues for consumerism.

Distribute the *What I Buy* handout to students. Give them time to answer the questions and encourage them to reflect on the differences between wants and needs.

What is Buy Nothing Day?

Ask students if any of them have heard of *Buy Nothing Day*. If any have, ask them what they know about it; if not, ask what they think it might be based on the name. Distribute the handout *Buy Nothing Day*, have students read it and answer the following questions (included on the handout):

- Do you think that we buy more things than we really need each day? Make a list of things which your family would normally spend money on each day, i.e. food, gas, bus fare, clothing etc.
- Look at your spending habits over the course of a month and see where most of your money goes. Do you attempt to budget your money?
- Why do we, as a culture, feel compelled to buy things we don't need for survival?
- Do you think commercials and advertisements make us feel we need things when we really don't?

- Why do you think our culture and media encourage us to buy things constantly? Is this a good, bad or neutral thing? Why?

Take up the questions with the class.

Buy Nothing Day events

Ask students why Buy Nothing Day is held after American Thanksgiving and before Christmas. How does each of these events involve consumerism?

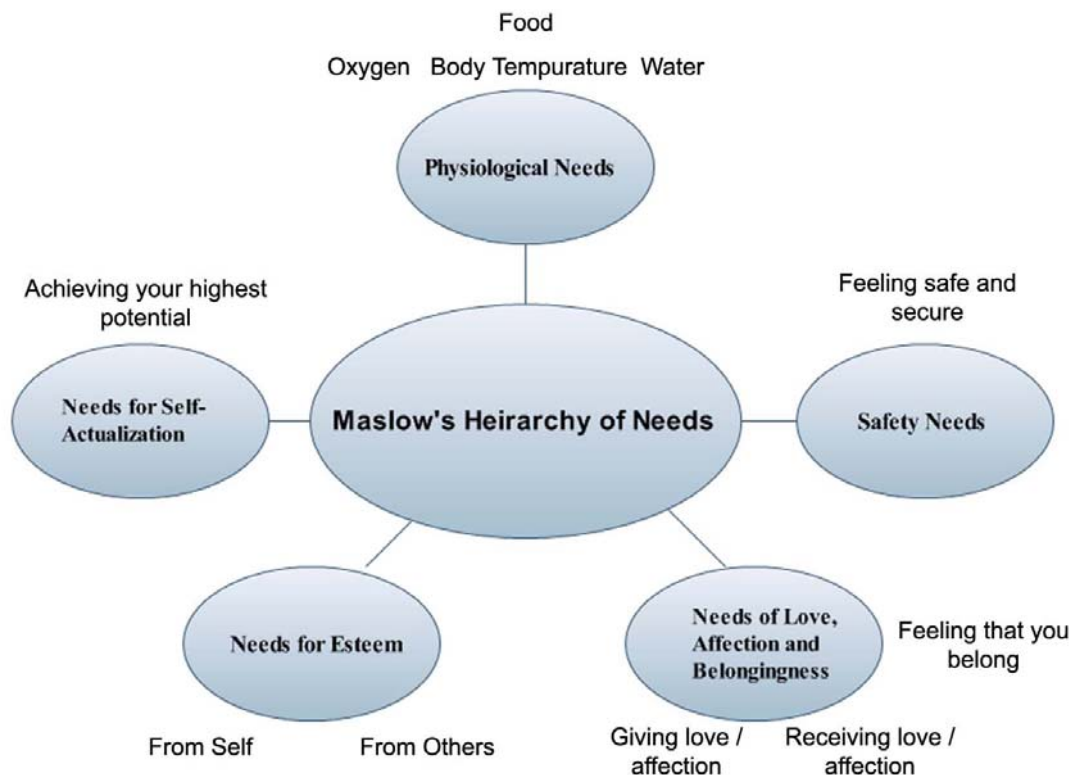
Ask students what events they associate with Christmas or other winter holidays. (Examples could include school Christmas assemblies, TV Christmas specials, Santa Claus parades, Christmas morning, etc.) Make a list of the ways in which a Christmas assembly or TV Christmas special (Peanuts, Rudolf, etc.) celebrates the values associated with Christmas and/or other winter holidays.

Break the class into groups. Ask each group to imagine that Buy Nothing Day is a holiday as important as Christmas. Each group should plan out either a Buy Nothing Day assembly or a Buy Nothing Day TV special. In each case, how would it be different from its Christmas equivalent? How would it celebrate the values associated with Buy Nothing Day?

Have the groups each present and explain what they invented.

Additional component for secondary students:

While students are completing their *What I Buy* handouts, draw the following mind map on the board:



Discussion:

Back in the 1940s, psychologist Abraham Maslow developed various categories that he believed humans need to achieve in order to reach their highest levels of consciousness and wisdom – a state of being that Maslow refers to as a "self-actualizing person." At the lowest levels are things we physically need – food, water, air, warmth. We also need to feel safe and secure, to belong and be loved, and to feel good about ourselves, in order to achieve our highest potential.

- What kinds of consumer goods would you consider to be essential in any of these categories?
- Look at your list of things you've bought. Where would they be?
- Are there any consumer goods that you would associate with Maslow's highest level of actualization?

Extension activities for all students

Have your class, or your school, prepare an actual Buy Nothing Day assembly.

Have students script a Buy Nothing Day TV special.

Buy Nothing Day

Buy Nothing Day was first organized in Vancouver in 1992. Since 1997 it has been celebrated on the Friday after American Thanksgiving, which is traditionally the first day of the Christmas shopping season and the biggest shopping day of the year in the U.S. Today Buy Nothing Day is celebrated in nearly twenty countries. (Outside of North America it happens on the following Saturday.)

The purpose of Buy Nothing Day is to make people think about the role of shopping, and more broadly consuming, in our culture – to make us pay attention to what we buy and why. In Canada Buy Nothing Day is most promoted by the magazine *Adbusters*, whose mission is to encourage people to question advertising messages. Celebrating Buy Nothing Day may involve protests, demonstrations or other media events, but it can also be observed in a more personal and reflective way.

Answer the following questions on lined paper and be prepared to discuss them in class.

- 1) Do you think that we buy more things than we really need each day? Make a list of things which your family would normally spend money on each day, i.e. food, gas, bus fare, clothing etc.
- 2) Why do we, as a culture, feel compelled to buy things we don't need for survival?
- 3) Do you think commercials and advertisements make us feel we need things when we really don't?
- 4) Why do you think our culture and media encourage us to buy things constantly? Is this a good, bad or neutral thing? Why?
- 5) Do you think Buy Nothing Day is an event worth observing? Why or why not?

Consumerism Diary

- 1) Between now and next class, write down everything you see and hear that is telling you to **buy** something. (It doesn't really matter what it is, just that you're being encouraged to buy things.) Keep note of where you get each message and the medium it was in (billboard, TV ad, etc.) Don't just count obvious ads – include every time you see a logo, a product placement, etc.

Time	Where I was	Medium

- 2) Look over your list and ask yourself the following questions.
- Were there any times of day when I wasn't being told to buy something?
 - Were there any places where I wasn't being told to buy something?
 - Were there any media that never told me to buy something?

What I Buy

- 1) Think back over the last day, week and month and try to remember everything you've bought. (Include things your parents or anyone else bought for you.) List as many things as you can below and under the heading "Why did I buy it?" write either: *I needed it, I wanted it or I don't know/can't remember*. You can continue the list on the other side if you need space!

Yesterday

What I bought	Why did I buy it?

Last week

What I bought	Why did I buy it?

Last month

What I bought	Why did I buy it?

- 2) Look through your list. How many things did you buy because you needed them? For each one, ask yourself if you really needed it and why. How many things did you buy because you wanted them? For each one, did you still want it as much after you had it? If you hadn't bought it, would you still want it now as much as you did?