

Ignorance is bliss?

Time: 20 min plus teachers' preparation

Group

Purpose

To see how much we know about where our clothes come from. The answer will almost certainly be, "Very little!" Then raise the question – does it matter?

Materials needed

Ask each member of the class to bring in one item of their own clothing that they like.

Background to the task

Many everyday products, however beautiful, have a 'hidden ugliness' within them. 'Hidden ugliness' is a term used by Edwin Datchefski in his excellent book *The Total Beauty of Sustainable Products*, where he draws attention to the pollution and social consequences of many things we buy. On clothing he writes:

"The manufacture of a T-shirt requires the use of 150g of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Cotton accounts for 25% of the world's insecticide use. And farm workers exposed to excess toxins are at risk from poisoning and health problems.

A study in Ghana revealed that some farmers are so used to using pesticides without protective clothing that they actually feel proud when they feel a bit sick at the end of the day, because it shows the chemicals are working properly.

Some wool-producing countries require all sheep to be dipped in strong chemicals. This sheep dip is linked with farmers feeling suicidal and suffering from memory loss.

Many clothes are sewn together by part-time workers who make less than the legal minimum wage, and who are forced to work long hours and unpaid overtime. Some manufacturers still use a third of a litre (12oz or a typical drink's can size) of adhesive just to make one pair of athletic shoes."

(The Total Beauty of Sustainable Products p 20)

A quick visit to www.sustainablecotton.org/index.html will give you some basic information on cotton production and the dire consequences of excessive use of pesticides such as brain damage, cancer, foetal damage, eye damage, and damage to the immune system, reproductive system, liver and spleen.

Nonetheless we all buy inorganic cotton clothes. Go to www.stepin.org and read the case study under Textiles Technology called 'Organic cotton to fair trade fashion'.

Carrying out the task

- Ask the students in groups of three to select which item of clothing they group think is best. (If they have all followed instructions they should be choosing from three garments.) *2 minutes*
- Ask each group to appoint a spokesperson and to present why they think the chosen item is best. They have a maximum of one minute (keep it moving fast). Ask them to report on anything they know about the materials, where the product was made, and the conditions of manufacture. *1 minute per group = 8 minutes*
- Present them with very brief information about the effects of pesticides on cotton. *2 minutes*
- Have a very brief whole class discussion on the question “Should we as a school encourage people to buy organic? And how can we find out from shops more about the origins of a product?” *8 minutes*

Some people may well have chosen a material made from polyester, acrylic or some other synthetic fibre. The same principle applies

Recording results

None

Extensions

- Older or more able students might be asked to make a poster or PowerPoint presentation on the impact of using inorganic pesticides.
- Write a letter to the Chair of a large retail chain (e.g. Monsoon, Gap, M&S) asking what is their policy on sourcing organic materials.