

I have met with some barren accomplished gentlemen who seemed to have been to school all their lives
and never had a vacation to live in.
H.D. Thoreau, October 20 1855

The True Cost of Things, Or, Spending Your Time Deliberately

School students often do not think about the cost of living nowadays – parents provide them with clothing, food and shelter. When they start working – they slowly begin to realize the value of their own work. This is an excellent exercise designed by a Reading High School teacher to make students think about their future in connection to the values of time, work and material goods. This exercise leads to an enriching discussion applicable to all disciplines.

- Ask your students to make a list of everything they wear on that day, including their jewelry, backpacks, eyeglasses, etc. In the space next to the articles, ask them to put an approximate cost of each object, and then calculate the total...
- Then, ask your students to calculate how many hours of their work (based on the highest paid salary they have been ever paid) it would take to earn their possessions on that day.
- Repeat the exercise for *all* the possessions students have (e.g. closets full of clothes, video and sports equipment, etc.).

Here are sample questions you can use for a discussion about what those numbers mean:

- What does the value of your possessions represent?
- Spending money vs. spending time
- If you could spend the perfect hour/perfect day – how would you spend it?
- How many hours a day do you spend doing something you *do* and something you *do not* enjoy doing?
- Of these hours, how much is required and how much is really needed?
- As a young adult you are not as much in control of how you spend your time as when you are an adult. How would you like to spend your time? How would you like to spend your time if you did not have to earn money? How would you like to spend your time if you could not earn money?
- What does expression 'living deliberately' mean?
- What would you like to be doing for a living? Count the percentage of hours you would be working out of your entire life's hours.
- Ask your students to think about what career path to choose. Expose them to different disciplines taught in school.

The Cost of Things exercise is almost solely based upon lesson plans of Janet Burne, teacher of English at Reading High School, Reading, MA. [See Janet Burne's original lesson plan from her participation in the Thoreau Institute's Summer Seminar of 2001.](#)