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BEHIND THE SCENES

Grades: 6 and up

Time: 45 minutes to several weeks, depending upon the detail, research, and involvement of the students

Materials: Items for analysis (see below)

Relevant Subjects: Social Studies, Science, History, Health, Language Arts, and, with modifications, Mathematics

1. Pick any ordinary product (for example: a CD, a bottle of shampoo, a computer, or a T-shirt), and ask the class to go backward in time to determine all the events that had to take place in order for the production and distribution of the product to become possible.

Let's say that you choose a conventional T-shirt. The questions accompanying the T-shirt could include the following:

- How did I come into existence?
- Who has been involved in my existence?
- Who or what was harmed for me to get to you right now?
- Who or what was helped for me to get to you right now?

Alternatives:

To make the lesson even more pertinent to the students and to engage their interest right from the start, you might ask them to pick an item from their desk, their backpack, or their clothing for a bit of sleuthing and investigating.

Another approach might be to wrap a few items up as gifts, divide the class into groups of five, and give a gift to each group. When the students open the gift they find not only the item for analysis, but also a list of questions.

2. Have students list everything they can think of that contributed to the production of the T-shirt. This might include: cutting down forests for cropland, planting cotton, applying pesticides, using laborers or machinery to pick, clean and spin the cotton, dyeing, weaving, sewing (and the laborers and machinery involved in these processes), behind-the-scenes factors that enable the machinery and the factories to exist, trucking,

and distributing the T-shirt, marketing, advertising, transporting it to a store (or a warehouse), using personal transportation to buy the T-shirt, and so on.

3. Once the list is complete, you can move on to another group's or student's product (for the shorter, more limited, version) or, for a longer, more detailed version, extend the analysis. Have each student or each group choose one aspect of the behind-the-scenes factors to research and write a concise description detailing the aspect that they've studied. Ask them to include in their report the effects their small part of the big picture of T-shirt production has on people, the environment, and animals. Photocopy these pages and put them together (in a roughly chronological order) so that each student can read a full behind-the-scenes account of the product. (Two excellent resources for this activity are *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things* by John C. Ryan and Alan Thein Durning and the National Science Teachers Association Press publication, *The Life Cycle of Everyday Stuff*.)

4. Have students suggest ways in which the production of a T-shirt could be less harmful. For example, the T-shirt could be made using organically-grown cotton, no chlorine bleach, and nontoxic dyes, and it could be produced closer to the source of the cotton to minimize transportation. The T-shirt could be sewn by people paid a fair wage and sold by companies that are committed to selling environmentally- and worker-friendly products.

5. Ask students to estimate how many T-shirts (or other products that have been analyzed) they have, and how many they actually wear or use. Did they ever buy a T-shirt (or other product) that they never wear or use? How many do they actually need?

6. Ask students to consider their own purchasing habits to determine which and how many T-shirts (or other products) they themselves will buy (or not), in the future.

Activity from *The Power and Promise of Humane Education*