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TRASH INVESTIGATORS

Grades: 4 and up

Time: 30 minutes

Materials: A garbage can filled with trash items; latex gloves for every student; newspaper or plastic sheeting on which to spread the trash

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

Preparation: Choose a trash can to analyze (it could be from the cafeteria, hallway, school office, or a classroom). At the end of a day, before the trash is dumped by the school custodian, bring it to your classroom and secure it with a note that it should not be emptied, so that you will have a day's worth of trash to analyze the next day.

1. Show students the can full of trash. Then spread newspaper or plastic on your desk or floor and dump out the entire contents of the trash. Divide the class into groups, and have several students come up and choose an item for their group. If there are enough pieces of garbage for each student, then have every student take an item. Provide latex gloves, if necessary.

3. Have students analyze their item by answering the following questions:

- Could this item have been recycled instead of thrown in the trash?
- Could this item have been composted instead of thrown in the trash?
- Could it have been prevented from ever entering the waste stream?
- Is this item a want or a need?
- Could this item have been reused in some creative way instead of thrown in the trash? If so, how? (This is the fun part of this activity. Encourage students to think imaginatively about what else the item could have been used for. They will likely generate some unusual ideas!)

4. Have students report on their items. If their item was not recyclable, compostable, or reusable in some creative way, have them return the item to the trash can. When all the students have reported, have them look in the trash can again. How do the contents of this trash can compare to its original contents?

5. Facilitate a discussion about waste, resource use, landfills, incinerators, etc., and invite students to consider if and how they might reduce their own trash production.

Extension: Have students do this activity at home for a week, and plan a visit to your local landfill, incinerator, recycling center, or transfer station.

Activity from *The Power and Promise of Humane Education*