

The big story... of

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You help me
stand up for
myself

THE STORY OF



WITH ANNIE LEONARD

For nearly a decade, I have been in search of good resources to teach topics related to environment and sustainability to an *urban* audience. One such resource which has a lot of potential and has stood the test of time is a documentary titled *Story of Stuff* (SoS). SoS is a 20-minute online documentary film on the lifecycle of "stuff". The film underscores the linear model of consumption of goods and their disposal. Though the film is more US based, there are strong take-aways for anyone who watches it. The successful launch of the film in 2007 led to a project that goes by the same name. Today, the project has become a large community of more than one million change-makers worldwide who are working towards making earth a healthier planet!

About the documentary film

The film features Annie Leonard, an environmental activist, who takes the viewers on a journey of discovery of where all our stuff comes from, and where it goes. The various processes highlighted include extraction of raw materials, production and manufacturing, distribution and marketing, and consumption and disposal. Further, the complex interconnections between these processes and societies, economies and environment are also explored. Establishing the link between our consumption patterns and sustainability is one of the important lessons one can learn from the documentary. The film offers scope for discussions and debates on social and ethical issues related to environment and sustainability. For example, should people who can afford a high standard of living consume resources at the cost of those who cannot afford them? Can we justify wasting food on our plates when we know close to one billion people are chronically under-

everything!

nourished? Complicated aspects of society such as social and economic class interactions, power dynamics, materials economy and demand-supply linkages are brought to light. Towards the end, certain current green practices which are being used by change-agents are mentioned, thus leaving the viewers on a positive note that we still have hope for planet earth!

Seeing the bigger picture and connecting the dots

My experience tells me that usually when environmental issues are discussed in schools or colleges, topics like pollution, global warming, climate change, and ozone depletion get a lot of emphasis. Be it a compulsory component of B.Sc. or B.Com., an elective for a teacher education course or a general school subject, the theory of these topics assumes prime importance. Often, the inter-connection of society and people with the environment is left out of the discussion. For example, teachers rarely ask questions like – *How are “you/we” responsible for global warming? What steps can “you/we” take in your/our life to reduce the burden on the environment? Is lack of awareness the only reason why people continue to pollute their surroundings?* Instead questions like the following are asked – *How does global warming happen? Who is responsible for it? How can we save the environment?* Such questions attract answers like – *Industries pollute our air and water. We can plant trees and save the planet. Rarely does the teacher probe into students' answers and question them further – OK, industries pollute our air and water, but what are those industries producing? The goods we use? So are we also responsible for pollution? OK, afforestation can help, but how many of us have planted trees? Will we take responsibility for the plant till it becomes a full grown tree? Is planting trees alone a feasible solution?*

Appropriate age group

SoS introduces many new and advanced terms related to the problems associated with sustainability. It is advisable to use it with students who are in grade 8 or above. The film is in English but perhaps the

tempo of Annie's speech may be a little too fast for young children, particularly if they are not proficient in English. So it would also be a good idea to play the film in a slower mode. Thanks to the increased popularity of the film, one can stumble upon dubbed versions of the same in some Indian regional languages. Lastly, I would say that this is a resource that can be of use not only for younger children, but also college students, adults, and teachers.

The documentary is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No-Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) and the official website (<http://storyofstuff.org/>) encourages people to organize their own screenings of the film. Several free PDF resources are also available for download which the viewers can access to initiate discussions and debates.

Note: Please note that the above passage has been written keeping urban students and teachers in mind and my personal experiences with them.

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