

Wasted Planet: How Educators Can Introduce the Epic Trash Crisis

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Abstract. This article centers around photos that I took during the 2009 Toronto garbage strike, revealing how garbage transformed Toronto's busy streets. While these photos are more than a decade old, they remain relevant and symbolic of a broader socio-political issue: municipal solid waste, known as everyday trash. It is the stuff that fills garbage bags and recycling bins like newspapers, plastic water bottles, and food waste. Municipal solid waste is a major global issue, with more than a billion tons created annually around the world. In this article, I take a metaphorical dumpster dive into this trash crisis. I list resources and activities that educators can use to start talking trash in K-12 and post-secondary classrooms. Special emphasis is placed on what I am calling, 'Trash Dialogues'.

Keywords: *municipal solid waste, throwaway societies, environmental injustice, waste colonialism, waste education*

Introduction

Toronto spends millions of dollars a year on solid waste management services (City of Toronto, 2023). This service division is responsible for collecting garbage, recycling and organic waste from across the city. There is weekly waste pickup for households and institutional and commercial establishments (City of Toronto, 2025). That is why the 2009 Toronto garbage strike remains so memorable. Seeing street litter bins in Toronto overflowing with trash was unusual.

On June 22, 2009, City of Toronto workers walked off the job (Albo & Rosenfeld, 2009; Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2009). Waste collection stopped. No garbage bins were emptied (CBC News, 2009). It was a visual reminder that something was wrong. Streets were filled with garbage. More than 20 arenas and parks were used as makeshift dumpsites for residents to drop-off bags of garbage (Lewington & Fenlon, 2009a). Gillis and Lunau (2009) state that Toronto Public Health were involved, monitoring the piles of trash for infestation (e.g., rodents, maggots). The garbage strike lasted from June 22 to July 27. Cleanup began on July 31. It was 39 days of smelly, dirty trash.



Dundas Street West, Toronto, Ontario

Late July 2009, I walked the streets of Toronto, taking photos of how the garbage strike transformed the city. Photos included in this article were taken around Day 30 of the strike. Litter

bins overflowed with trash spilling onto sidewalks. There were soda cans, crumpled old newspapers, and plastic bottles and cups by the dozens. Remnants of takeout meals were left baking in the sun. A foul, rotting odor hung in the air, smelling like a mix of grease, spoiled food and sour milk. The trash was ugly. It blemished landscapes, destroyed sunsets. But more than this it was symbolic of a bigger sustainability issue: municipal solid waste. According to Kaza et al. (2018), “The world generates 2.01 billion tonnes of municipal solid waste annually... global waste is expected to grow to 3.40 billion tonnes by 2050” (p. 3).

A Condensed History of Waste

All trash is equal, but some trash is more equal than others. The photos that I took during the Toronto garbage strike depicted a particular type of trash: municipal solid waste. This waste is the everyday trash we discard. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency:

Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) – more commonly known as trash or garbage – consists of everyday items we use and then throw away, such as product packaging, grass clippings, furniture, clothing, bottles, food scraps, newspapers, appliances, paint, and batteries. This comes from our homes, schools, hospitals, and businesses. (EPA, 2016, para. 1)

Our trash is filled with throwaway items. Throwaways are cheap disposable products that offer a temporary fix, fulfill short-term goals. They are purposely designed to be used for a short-time and trashed. A coffee cup, for example, is a throwaway. It is designed to be used once, for one cup of coffee and then trashed. In technical language, throwaways are based on a ‘cradle-to-grave’ design (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, pp. 27–28), planned obsolescence (Pope, 2017), and the linear economic model (Gale, 1989). Throwaways are resource-intensive and wasteful. Constant economic growth is prioritized at the expense of people and the planet.

Throwaway products were available in the United States, dating back to the 1800s. Throwaways like toothpaste tubes were first sold by Colgate & Company in 1896 (Britannica Money, 2024). Johnson & Johnson (n.d.) introduced adhesive bandages in 1921 and disposable diapers in 1935. DuPont unveiled disposable toothbrushes in 1938 (Museum of Design in Plastics, 2024). But it was not until the 1950s that throwaway items flooded the American market.

In his TED talk, *Seas of Plastic* (Plastic Pollution Coalition, 2015), Moore describes how during earlier periods in US history, like the Great Depression and World War II, the conservation ethic was dominant. But post-WWII, this changed. America needed to produce new products and grow its economy. The solution was manufacturing more throwaways. This ushered in throwaway (‘disposable’) culture: the practice of using and disposing, satisfying immediate wants and desires. It was no longer about saving for tomorrow but rather living for today.

In the 21st century, we live in a throwaway world, where it is all about short-termism. Food packaging is trashed after the food is eaten (Walker et al., 2021). Clothing is tossed when no

longer trendy (Ross, 2021). And when electronics are out of date, they are junked (Bennett, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, disposables like medical masks and latex gloves were a popular garbage item (Gamillo, 2021). Other examples of disposable consumer goods: cosmetics (Hall, 2022), furniture (Perry, 2022), food waste (Ellis-Petersen & Hassan, 2024), cookware (Bliszczyk, 2020), sneakers (Hoskins, 2020), and books (Berendsen, 2023). Many throwaway products are made of synthetic plastic and will never biodegrade (Karali et al., 2024). How do we respond to throwaway culture?



The above photo was included in a 1955 Life Magazine article, titled “Throwaway Living” (pp. 43-44). This photo is of a man, woman and child standing around a garbage can, smiling as they throw housewares like paper plates, napkins and cups into the air. The advice given in this article was to use these products (once) and trash them, a no fuss clean up. Throwaways were marketed as a timesaver, a modern day convenience. Prices for throwaways advertised in the article range from 79 cents to \$2.98.



A metal garbage bin knocked down - representing how Torontonians were angry about the garbage strike



A dog urinating on a garbage bag

Waste Education 2.0: Trash Dialogues

In North America, waste education programs currently exist and lesson plans and toolkits are widely available for K-12 and post-secondary. These programs tend to focus on municipal solid waste management with an emphasis on reducing, reusing, repairing, and recycling (EcoSchools Canada, 2022; EPA, 2005; National Education Association, 2025; National Energy Education Development Project, 2017; Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, 2022; Rethink Waste, 2021; U of T Trash Team, 2023; York Region, 2024).

I argue that there is an urgent need to expand waste education. Western countries are generally high-income countries with high consumption and waste and a large ecological footprint (Stern, 2025; Winters, 2023). Kaza et al. (2018) state, “Though they only account for 16 percent of the world’s population, high-income countries generate about 34 percent, or 683 million tonnes, of the world’s waste” (p. 3). To continue down the path of excessive consumption and waste is unethical and socially irresponsible. Waste education is typically presented as apolitical. It needs to be politicized.

I propose that waste education in North America include what I am calling, *Trash Dialogues*. This entails having broader conversations of waste, thinking about how trash is an economic, geopolitical, ethical, environmental, and socio-cultural issue. What is the connection between the trash crisis and mental health? How are consumption and waste interlinked? When talking about waste, why is it also important to talk about consumption? How is garbage tied to racial injustice and poverty? How is throwaway culture a policy issue, a political-economic issue, a mindset, worldview? How do landfills contribute to climate change? How do we reconcile with our ‘trash guilt’ – knowing that waste we produce today will have multi-generational consequences (Girardet, 2023)? Trash tends to be treated as a natural part of the consumer economy. How can this narrative be challenged? How can we incorporate Indigenous perspectives? The purpose of this new, revised waste education is to inspire students to become innovators, researchers, change agents, politically engaged and informed citizens. *Trash Dialogues* promotes a shift away from student as consumer towards student as meaning maker.

Teaching Resources: Trashy Documentaries

There are a series of free, online documentaries that can be used to springboard into dialoguing about everyday trash: recycling waste, clothing waste, electronic waste (e-waste), and so on. Seeing the trash nightmare unfold on screen helps to put the garbage problem in perspective. These documentaries provide visual evidence of the trash crisis.

The Plastic Problem by PBS NewsHour (2019) highlights how consumer goods are packaged in plastic. Foods are wrapped in plastic. Beverages come in plastic bottles. Soap and shampoo containers are made out of plastic. Groceries are carried home in plastic bags. All this plastic is single-use and has created a big problem: plastic pollution. The documentary points to single-use

plastics sometimes being recycled but often ending up in other places like waterways, landfills, warehouses, and shipped to the Global South.



The image represents food waste in a hungry world

Another documentary, *Plastic, Not So Fantastic* by 60 Minutes Australia (2019) investigates the plastic recycling industry. This documentary reports that Australia and other Western countries like New Zealand were legally shipping their plastic recycling to China for decades. But when China stopped accepting the rubbish in 2018, it ended up illegally dumped in Malaysia. This documentary exposes the illegalities of the trash trade. Illegal factories in Malaysia make big money processing plastic recycling into polyethylene terephthalate (PET) pellets, a valuable commodity that can be sold to companies to manufacture new plastic goods. However, plastic trash that cannot be turned into PET pellets is set on fire, buried or left littering Malaysia's farmland. It is an environmental disaster, destroying air and water quality for the sake of financial gain.

Water, air, soil and plastic? Documentaries expose how microplastics are part of our everyday lives. *You're Breathing in Microplastics, But What Does that Mean for Your Health?* by Seeker (2021) describes how all living things (including humans) are inhaling microplastics. *Plastic Makers Have A Big Secret* by More Perfect Union (2024) reveal how microplastics are found in our food and beverages. But humans are not the only ones suffering the 'plastic plague'. *Plastic Paradise* provides a detailed look into how plastic has changed the world's oceans (Sun, 2014).

Plastic Oceans calls attention to how plastic is killing marine life (ABC Science, 2012).

Fast fashion is another major trash issue. Documentaries like *The Environmental Disaster Fuelled by Used Clothes and Fast Fashion* (ABC News In-depth, 2021), *Fast Fashion* (DW Documentary, 2022), and *Textile Mountain* (IFOAM – Organics International, 2020) spotlight the fast fashion disaster. According to these documentaries, Western countries like Canada, Europe, and Australia are overflowing with used clothes, shipping vast quantities to Chile, Kenya, and Ghana. This has supported a second-hand clothing trade. Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana, is one of the largest used clothing markets in the world. However, used clothing that is damaged and cannot be sold is dumped, creating mass pollution. Enormous amounts of textile waste is found in Chile's Atacama Desert and at Nairobi's Dandora dumpsite in Africa.



“Welcome to Toronto”: Sandy beaches, public transit, and garbage filled-sidewalks

Other documentaries emphasize electronic waste. In the digital age, technology is always changing. Older technologies are being dumped at the expense of newer technologies. This has resulted in growing piles of e-waste. E-waste represents all things electronic like computers, televisions, and cell phones. *Best Documentary* (2023) takes us on a trip to Agbogbloshie, an e-waste dump in Accra. Western countries like the United Kingdom dump their e-waste at Agbogbloshie. This documentary follows a group of young Ghanaian men who burn this e-waste to extract copper. As this documentary shows, this is a dangerous, low-wage job and there are

lethal health effects. Other documentaries by CNA Insider (2024) call attention to the e-waste problem in Thailand and Malaysia.

Western countries are generally higher-income countries with economic resources to deal with their garbage. This includes having recycling facilities, compost sites, incineration plants, and well monitored landfills (Weghmann, 2023). But these documentaries provide sufficient evidence of Western nations exporting a substantial amount of their solid waste to poorer countries in the Global South. Exporting trash to poorer countries is a destructive practice. Poorer countries generally do not have strong environmental mandates or effective infrastructure to deal with the garbage (EPA, 2023; Michaelson, 2021). As a result, the waste is not properly disposed. Instead it contaminates and pollutes and creates toxic living conditions. The most vulnerable groups (e.g., plants, animals, air, water, soil, marginalized communities) suffer the consequences of waste that they did not create. This emphasizes an imbalance of power, exploitation, environmental injustice, environmental racism, and waste colonialism (Hortmann & Friedrich, 2024; Jedelhauser, 2023; Ritchie, 2022; Shingler, 2024; Varkkey, 2019; Winters, 2022; Wood, 2019).

Teaching Resources: Trash Units

Trash units could be introduced to support *Trash Dialogues*. These study units could be introduced in every school subject, providing an interdisciplinary approach to the epic trash crisis. Here is a breakdown of what these units could look like at the elementary level (Grades K-8):

- In art classes, students could create sculptures using recycling waste and display their masterpieces at community centers and local libraries. This could be an activist art project, connecting trash to broader themes like economics, geopolitics, and culture (Causeartist, 2023).
- In health and physical education courses, students could study food waste at their school. How is food waste a cultural issue? Resources: Montana State University (2017), Time Staff (2016)
- In music courses, students could transform common recycling items (e.g., cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, glass jars) into musical instruments and use music as a way to discuss the ‘recycling myth’. Check out Trashbeatz (TEDx Talks, 2015). A reading: Sanera and Shaw (1999)
- In language classes, students could have a Read-A-Thon fundraiser where the goal is to read a variety of different books and sources on waste. All funds raised could be donated to a local environmental organization.
- In math class, students could explore the economic and environmental costs of waste. The challenge: for students to create and implement a plan for their school to go waste free.



"Please recycle here" - This image represents the recycling myth, the fantasy that all plastic waste is recycled



Queen Street West, Toronto, Ontario

Resources: Badham (2019), Manitoba Education and Training (2014)

- In science and technology courses, students could brainstorm solutions to the plastic recycling problem. Is the circular economy the solution (Greenpeace, 2022)? Is there a technological fix? A science fair could be dedicated to showcasing the results. Resources: Nature on PBS (2024), TeachEngineering (2020)
- In social studies and history courses, students could choose a mass-produced item (e.g., book, toy, electronic device) and learn about it. Where and how was it made? Was it ethically produced? Is it recyclable? The Story of Stuff Project (2009) could be used to introduce this activity. Other resources: Moconomy (2025)
- In geography courses, students could go on a ‘litter walk’ in their neighborhood and document what they find. What litter items are most common? If you were from Mars, and only visiting Earth, would you want to mass-produce these items on your home planet? Why or why not?

At the high school (Grades 9-12) and post-secondary level, some possibilities:

- In language courses, students could write personal trash narratives. For inspiration, read: Bjeletich (2024) “Garbage Anxiety: Intimacy and Interconnection at the Landfill” and Cooperman (2023) “How Trash Transformed into a Tangible Metaphor”
- In health and physical education courses, students could look into the relationship between health and wellbeing and the trash crisis. How might the garbage crisis affect one’s ability to live a healthy, active lifestyle (Raphela et al., 2024)?
- In math and business courses, students could look into whether green consumerism is really ‘green’ (CBC News, 2023). What about conscious consumption (Rickenbacher, 2020)?
- In science and technology classrooms, students could create sustainable designs, finding ways to divert trash from the landfill. Can trash be turned into new products (Business Insider, 2021; The Economist, 2022)? Is this a sustainable solution to the trash crisis?
- In drama and theatre courses, students could explore themes of consumerism in film. Some films: *The Truman Show* (1998), *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). A reading: Bailey (2013) “Memory, place and the mall: George Romero on consumerism”
- In art classes, students could create photo essays, exploring how Western society is structured around consumption and waste. Resources: Fawcett-Atkinson (2021), Johnson (2024), Scott (2014)

- In geography courses, students could investigate the environmental impact of over-tourism. Some possible cases: Mount Everest (Limbu, 2024), Galápagos Islands (Brown, 2024), and Bali (Permana, 2024). Is ‘sustainable tourism’ the way forward?
- In history disciplines, students could study the history of waste. What lessons can be learned from this history? Students could write a letter to future generations (for an example, see Prince Ea, 2015). Other resources: Assuah (2023), Copley (2024), Gershon (2023), Townsends (2025)
- In social science courses, students could write and produce podcasts on racism and gender inequality in ‘fast industries’ like fast fashion, fast beauty, and fast furniture for example (Legesse, 2020; Morgan, 2015).
- In psychology courses, there could be an emphasis on mental health. Students could develop community campaigns, raising awareness about how the trash crisis is a mental health crisis. Resources: Lassiter (2024), Peprah et al. (2024), Semuels (2018)
- In political science courses, students could examine government policies. Countries like Canada are banning single-use plastics (Chung, 2024). Right-to-repair laws are popping up in the United States (Zandt, 2024). Students could research the effectiveness of these current policies and recommend alternative policy. Other resources: Dalhammar et al. (2022)
- In cooperative education courses, students could work with industry partners and community groups that have sustainable business practices. These partnerships are supported by Ho et al. (2023).

K-12 and post-secondary students could start ‘Wasted Planet’ movements as a collective response to the trash crisis. Students could create podcasts, hold community events, start school clubs, design social media campaigns, create petitions, and write letters to municipal government leaders for example to peacefully advocate for justice, speaking up for ecosystems and marginalized communities who are suffering or oppressed from global waste. This is a form of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012). Students could collaborate across school districts and even countries to help propel this environmental movement forward.

Lifelong Learning

The true purpose of *Trash Dialogues* extends beyond history class or math class or a political science course. These dialogues are lifelong. They are intended to be a lens through which we think and act in our everyday lives. Drawing on Freire (2005), these dialogues aim to awaken critical consciousness about consumption and waste. When I was writing this article, I needed to buy a new bicycle tire tube. So, I headed to my local shopping mall. I used *Trash Dialogues* as a framework to help me interpret my experience.

This mall is 20 minutes north of Toronto. It has over 140 stores and recent renovations cost more than \$80 million. After crossing the parking lot and dodging a few cars, I made my way to the mall entrance. The automatic doors opened and I was welcomed by light cascading down from a skylight window. There was something unholy about this place. I walked past rows of stores. Clearance signs were posted in large oversized lettering. Pop music played in the background. Mannequins were posed like models in a teen magazine. I took a shortcut through the food court. It was crowded with people eating fast food lunches. A custodian walked past me, pushing a garbage bin full of fast food containers. “More trash for the landfill,” I thought to myself.



“We’ve been expecting...” a more sustainable world

I had been to this mall before. When I was eight years old, my grandmother bought me a doll here. When I was 17, I shopped for prom accessories. Last year, I bought a pair of pink sandals. That was a playful time. I now interpreted the mall for what it was: a temple of throwaway culture, an epicentre of consumerism and capitalism (Taylor, 2015). The goal here was to consume. The mall’s layout was manipulated design (Kavilanz, 2024). Store staff approached me like a shark circling its prey. The cheap prices reeked of sweatshops and planned obsolescence. From fast beauty to fast food to fast tech, the mall was full of material stuff on the fast track to being bought, used and dumped. It felt as serious as a heart attack and it was nauseating. By shopping here, I was part of the problem. I was supporting an economic system with ties to racial injustice, gender inequality, abuse of power, exploitation, and environmental destruction (Aponte et al., 2024). I wanted to be part of the solution. In a world overflowing with stuff, perhaps it is

time to ditch the mall and consumption traditions like back-to-school shopping, holiday shopping, and compulsory gift-giving (MacKinnon, 2022). Instead of shopping, time could be better spent learning, conserving nature, and fostering mental health and wellness. No credit cards required.

Concluding Remarks

The Toronto garbage strike brought out the ‘not in my backyard’ mentality. Toronto residents were angry that garbage filled their streets (The Canadian Press, 2009). But when the strike was over, everything went back to normal. Waste management was back in full swing. Garbage pick-up resumed and “48,900 tonnes” of Toronto trash was cleaned up (Lewington & Fenlon, 2009b). In 2011, garbage collection was privatized for a large part of Toronto, helping to ensure that such a smelly strike would never happen again (Jeffords, 2024; Scarborough Mirror, 2009).

The Toronto garbage strike was a waste management issue. But waste management is about managing waste. What about ending the waste stream? Cooper (2016) explains that transitioning “away from a throwaway culture thus requires change across society: in public policy, design and marketing strategies, consumer attitudes and behaviour, and socio-cultural norms” (p. 3). Policy could be created to support degrowth. Design and marketing strategies could be crafted to support ‘green’ or environmentally friendly consumer goods. Consumer attitudes and behaviors could change to want green products. But socio-cultural norms require solidarity. “Social and cultural norms are rules or expectations of behavior and thoughts based on shared beliefs within a specific cultural or social group” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018, p. 1).

Trash Dialogues encourage a paradigm shift, large-scale change across Western society, promoting new social and cultural norms. These dialogues promote reducing mass consumption and waste. These dialogues support non-material culture, disturb the status quo, go against economic traditions. These dialogues are about bringing people together, building peaceful and harmonious relations, advancing planetary health and intergenerational equity. Introducing trash discussions in classrooms may be controversial, uncomfortable, socially taboo. But since students in our classrooms have inherited this crisis, it is essential that they lead ‘Wasted Planet’ movements. World trash grows by the minute (The World Counts, 2025). We need to take action now.

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