Inquiry Center: Analyzing Poetry by Xu Lizhi

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Grade level: Grade 12 World Issues

Learning centre topic and theme: Poverty, capitalism, and responsible citizenship

Learning centre objectives: SCOs from the NB World Issues 12 curriculum

* 1.2 investigate different conceptions of quality of life including conceptions beyond those measured by economic success
* 2.1 analyze issues resulting from interactions among individuals, groups, and societies
* 2.3 demonstrate personal and social responsibility for a peaceful and sustainable world.
* 3.3 evaluate causes, consequences, and solutions to violations of a group or individual’s human rights

Description: This inquiry center will highlight the importance of responsible consumerism and have students think about the conditions under which consumer products are produced globally. In this inquiry center, students will read one of Xu Lizhi’s poems out loud to the group and the facilitator will lead a discussion about what the students read and what meaning they were able to make of the poems individually, and as a collection and what these poems mean for us as Canadians and consumers. Students will try to piece together information about the poet’s life and death based on what they read and heard.

Materials required:

Copies of Xu Lizhi’s poems for each member of the inquiry center (I am using *I Fell Asleep Just Standing Like That, The Last Graveyard, Rented Room, I Swallowed a Moon Made of Iron, A Screw Fell to the Ground,* and *On My Deathbed*).

* Lizhi’s poems can be found here: <http://libcom.org/blog/xulizhi-foxconn-suicide-poetry>
* Questions to help analyze the poem including: What are these poems about? What do the poems tell us about the poet? What story do the poems tell individually versus as a collection?
* Discussion questions like: What implications do these poems have on us as Canadians/consumers? What can we do with this information? How does this information complicate the legacy of Steve Jobs? Do you think working conditions have changed since this poet’s death?
* Information to share about Xu Lizhi- Xu Lizhi was a factory worker at Foxconn in Shenzhen, China. Lizhi worked at the factory from 2010 until his death by suicide in 2014. He wrote poems for the factory newspaper, some of which were used in the inquiry center, but the majority of his poems were discovered after his death.
* Information to know about Foxconn: a factory in Shenzhen, China producing electronics including the BlackBerry, iPhone, iPod, Kindle, Nintendo 3DS, Nokia, Playstation, Wii, and Xbox. The factory is mostly known for its production of iPhones. There have been 25 cases of known death by suicide of Foxconn workers and a strike in 2012 including the threat of mass suicide by about 150 strikers if working conditions were not improved. Foxconn put next around factories to stop working from being able to die by suicide. The most recent reported death by suicide by jumping off a Foxcon building occurred in 2018.

Procedure:

* Hand out different poems to students in order of the date they were written.
* Before students read the poems ask them what they notice about the writing on the page. (Help them come to the conclusion that the poet is perhaps from China or speaks Chinese.)
* Have the students read the poems aloud in the order of the date written.
* After each poem, pause and ask the students what they know about the poet or what the poet is writing about.
* After the first poem it should become apparent that the poet works in a factory so from that point onward you can also ask what each poem reveals about the condition of the factory or what the factory might make.
* Tell the group that the poems were all by the same poet and see if they can make more meaning with that knowledge. What do the poems mean as a collection? (Note the common themes, the way the collection ends)
* Finally, reveal to the group that the poet was a worker at a Foxconn factory who died by suicide in 2014. Ask students how what these poems mean for us as readers? Be sure to have students speak to what this information means for consumers of the products (electronics, namely iPhones and gaming consoles). What can we as consumers do with this information? You could also have a conversation surrounding how popular companies are implicated by this and a conversation surrounding Steve Job’s legacy and how we might choose to remember him.

Note: If students are struggling to analyze their poem, have them pair share with a partner in the inquiry center. If you know ahead of time that some students will struggle with poetry analysis, give all of the students the same poem, discuss it as a group, then move on to do the same for one or two more poems.

Suggestions for extension activities: Students could research where their electronic devices or clothing are produced and under what conditions and share their findings with the class in a number of different forms including a visual, paper, presentation, or other representation.

This activity can also be easily used and adapted for High School English Language Arts and Business classrooms.