

Student Book Club: The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy

Joy M. Kozar, Ph.D., Department of Apparel, Textiles & Interior Design, Kansas State University, USA
jkozar@ksu.edu

1. Level	UG
2. Pre-requisite knowledge required by educators	D. Specific knowledge required: at least a minimal understanding of international trade regulations and policies. Knowledge of the various ethical, legal, logistical, social and environmental issues involved in the global production and distribution of textile and apparel goods is also beneficial to creating an ideal learning environment
3. Pre-requisite knowledge required by students	B. General knowledge of the textiles and garment industry required: Depending on the students' background understanding of the economics of apparel and textile trade, the instructor might find it necessary to leave out some discussion questions that extend beyond the students' comprehension
4. Number of students	Any number
5. Length of time required	Adjustable
6. Type of activity	Individual work, Group work, Book related, Discussion and debate, Research related
7. Discipline	Business, Cross-curricular
8. Topics covered	Agriculture, Companies, Globalisation, History, Migrant workers, Second hand clothes, Supply chains, Technology, Textiles, Trade

OBJECTIVES / LEARNING OUTCOMES

The overarching goal of this activity is to assist students in recognizing the structure, dynamics, and distribution channels of the global textile and apparel industries from both current and historical perspectives. This involves an evaluation of the cultural, economic, and political factors impacting sourcing decisions, in addition to the implications of various global alliances on trade policies and regulations. Upon completion of this activity, students should recognize various factors that impact compliance with labor laws, standards of social responsibility, and the treatment of workers in textile and apparel production. The assignment challenges students' critical thinking skills and supports further development of their written and verbal abilities.

INTRODUCTION

This learning activity requires that students read and respond to multiple discussion questions stemming from the book, *The Travels of a T-shirt in the Global Economy*, written by Pietra Rivoli. Originally created for a course that introduces and includes an analysis of the global fiber, textile, and apparel industries, this assignment is most effective in smaller seminar-format classes. However, this activity has also been implemented in larger lecture classes with few modifications. In larger sized classes, it is recommended that students be divided into small discussion groups (approximately 5-10 students per group) with alternating discussion leaders. For smaller classes (approximately 30 students or less), discussions can be led by the instructor or alternating students.

Individual class sessions can be periodically set aside during the course of the semester to discuss the content of Rivoli's book. This is a useful strategy for supplementing related course content and various subjects introduced in class. If adequate class time to discuss Rivoli's book is not available, the instructor can require students to submit their responses as a midterm or final project.

This activity can be integrated into a course as several individual assignments or as a larger semester project. Questions are developed based on separate sections of the book. Depending on the size of the class and the instructor's preference, students can work on forming their responses to these questions individually or in pairs or larger groups. Due dates can correspond with the content of the topics discussed in class as outlined in the course schedule or responses can be submitted in their entirety as a midterm or semester project.

To enhance student learning outcomes, all students should be thoroughly prepared to discuss the assigned readings prior to class. Based on the responses given by students, the instructor may find it useful to probe for further information as a mechanism for fostering a more in-depth discussion. This strategy is also useful for guiding students to think more critically about the subject matter, including the various social and environmental issues related to the production and trade of apparel goods. Questions relating to each chapter are outlined below.

Preface and Prologue

1. What do you believe was the author's major objective for writing this book?
Probe: How did the author originally get interested in this topic?

PART I: King Cotton

Chapter 1: Reinsch Cotton Farm, Smyer, Texas

1. According to Rivoli, the U.S. has remained the top cotton producer in the world for over 200 years. Explain the reasons Rivoli gives for this continued dominance.
Probe: On page 7, the author writes "U.S. cotton growers have since the beginning been embedded in a set of institutions that insulate them from the full strength of a variety of market forces." What do you think Rivoli meant by this statement?

Chapter 2: The History of American Cotton

1. By the mid 19th century, the majority of cotton produced in the U.S. was in the American South. Describe how plantation owners ensured large-scale cotton production during this time period (before and after the civil war).
Probe: How were workers "tied to the land" by plantation owners?
2. Why did cotton production increase significantly in the US during the early to mid 19th Century while in other parts of the world, particularly in China and India, cotton production remained fairly constant?
Probe: What other technological advancements have impacted apparel and textile production and distribution since that time?

Chapter 3: Back at the Reinsch Farm

1. In the early 1940s, the U.S. Department of Labor authorized the Bracero Program. Why was it initially formed and what major purposes did it serve?
Probe: Are there certain elements of the Bracero Program that could be viewed as unethical or immoral? Explain.
2. What was the significance of the mechanical cotton stripper to farmers (i.e., why was it so critical to their success)?



- How are farmers benefiting from the recycling and reusing of the “garbage” collected when cotton is picked? What are some of the ways cotton trash is being reused?

Probe: Would you consider these to be sustainable initiatives? Why or why not? What does the term sustainability mean to you?

- Respond to the following phrase found on page 55: “The low labor costs that might give the poor farmers an advantage are in fact their undoing.” What does the author mean by this?

PART II: Made in China

Chapter 4: Cotton Comes to China

- In all the stages of production discussed by the author, which one has been the most difficult to mechanize? Why do you think this is?

Chapter 5: The Long Race to the Bottom

- Who does the author state were some of the earliest cotton mill workers (in both Britain and New England)? Why were these particular groups sought by factory owners? What commonalities do these workers share with those now working in apparel production factories?

Chapter 6: Sisters in Time

- Describe, in your own words, China’s Hukou System.
- Within Chapter 6, the author uses the term “floating workers.” Describe these workers.
Probe: What commonalities exist between China’s Hukou System and the Bracero Program initiated in the 1940s by the U.S. Department of Labor?
- Given Rivoli’s discussion, do you believe China’s textile and apparel factories are a form of liberation or enslavement for workers? Explain your answer.
Probe: What other sources of information besides Rivoli’s book would you consult to help you with this decision on liberation or enslavement?

PART III: Trouble at the Border

Chapter 7: Dogs Snarling Together

- What reasons does the author give for the significant increase in China’s apparel exports to other industrialized nations while exports to the U.S. have been far less striking?
- Examine Figure 7.3 on page 121. Why might China’s quota limit on cotton knit shirts be so much lower than

several other countries’, including Vietnam, Turkey, and Pakistan?

Probe: How do the political relationships between countries influence trade regulations?

- Given what you know from reading Rivoli’s book and other knowledge about textile and apparel trade, explain why textile and apparel trade and policy has been, and continues to be, a major political issue.
Probe: Why has the protection of apparel and textile manufacturing jobs been a critical issue to voters in the American South? How have U.S. politicians responded to these concerns?

Chapter 8: Perverse Effects and Unintended Consequences of T-Shirt Trade Policy

- Worldwide, both domestic and offshore jobs in the textile and apparel production industries are declining because of what?
- What are some of the unintended outcomes of the quota system addressed by the author?
Probe: Why was the quota system originally established?

Chapter 9: 40 Years of “Temporary” Protectionism Ends in 2005 – and China Takes All

- Why were trade policies with Pakistan renegotiated shortly after September 11, 2001?
- According to the author, what will happen to many poor developing countries when quotas are completely phased out?
- What strategies does the author write about that countries such as India and Pakistan intend to use to compete with China in the race to the bottom? What about Cambodia?
Probe: What other strategies can be implemented by countries wanting to compete with China in the worldwide production of apparel goods?

PART IV: My T-Shirt Finally Encounters a Free Market

Chapter 10: Where T-Shirts Go after the Salvation Army Bin

- What is your perception of the recycled clothing industry as discussed by Rivoli and given your personal experience with donating clothing? Do you believe it promotes sustainability and social responsibility, or does it just treat some of the world’s poorest countries as dumping grounds? What might happen to clothing that is discarded in another way? Explain your answer.



Chapter 11: How Small Entrepreneurs Clothe East Africa with Old American T-Shirts

1. What reasons does the author give for why recycled men's clothing exported to Tanzania is sold at much higher prices than women's clothing?
2. Why do some African countries ban the import of used clothing, according to the author? Why does the author criticize the barriers erected to mitumba trade?
3. How is mitumba shopping for the African consumer similar to apparel shopping for the American consumer?

Conclusion and Epilogue

1. After reading this book, what was most interesting or surprising to you? Were your original perceptions regarding the global trade of textile and apparel goods changed? Why or why not? Would you describe yourself as a protectionist or an advocate of globalization and free trade? Explain.

ASSESSMENT

Students are evaluated on four major criteria, including:

- Completeness of responses: Was the entire question answered thoroughly? Did the student use examples to substantiate responses?
- Justification of argument: Were answers sound and based on appropriate and educated reasoning? Was a rigorous approach taken in defending opinions and viewpoints?
- Overall professionalism: (correct grammar, spelling, etc., in written responses).
- Participation in class discussion.

REFLECTIONS

Upon completion of the assignment, students often recognize the differences in viewpoints among those who advocate globalization and free trade versus those who support more protectionist perspectives. Students are also perceived to possess an advanced knowledge of the markets, influences, and policies of world trade, including factors that impact working conditions and the treatment of workers in the garment industry. An effective assessment of this activity which provides a forum for student feedback is an evaluation of students' responses to the conclusion/epilogue question. Specific responses received from students previously include the following:

"...My original perceptions regarding the global trade of textile and apparel goods have changed. I used to support globalization very much, not caring about sweatshops at all. My knowledge of child labor or sweatshops was not well educated. I appreciated finding really good deals while shopping at the mall. After reading this book, and taking this course, it is hard for me to buy a really cheap item without thinking about the people who made it. I will also look at the tag of the item to see where it was made. Most of the clothes I own were made in China. I still support globalization because it does help improve a country's economy and infrastructure. Yet, I believe the countries America imports from should have fair labor laws for all apparel and textile workers..."

"One of the most striking things brought up in this book was the complexity of the apparel and textile industry worldwide... I never gave thought to where clothing goes after places like the Salvation Army... In reading this book, I found myself very torn between being mad about the exploitation of workers in other countries or thinking that some of these countries are better off being a part of this industry to help improve their economy... I just loved how she [the author] gave such insight into how politics and the apparel and textile industry are related and that the lines between ethics and the race to the bottom are becoming more and more blurry with each passing year."

"...By far the most surprising thing I have learned would be the dependence of developing countries on the apparel and textile industry. Before reading this book, I never knew that many smaller, underdeveloped countries were so dependent on the industry..."



"Before reading this book and taking this class, I really didn't know anything about the global trade of textile and apparel goods. I definitely think that my perception of the industry has changed, because now I am more knowledgeable about the industry... I found this book to be very fascinating and informative about a number of issues including the struggles of cotton farmers, how technology has changed cotton farming, about workers in China and the conditions they often are working in, as well as the recycling of clothing..."

PROJECT EXTENSION

Based on feedback received from students, in addition to an assessment of students' learning outcomes, the instructor may also consider assigning additional readings that corroborate and/or challenge Rivoli's book. The textbook, *Going Global* by Grace I. Kunz and Myrna B. Garner, is useful in providing background information on the production and distribution of textile and apparel goods in the age of globalization. For students particularly interested in the treatment and exploitation of workers in apparel production, as well as tactics in combating sweatshops and labor abuse, the book, *Slaves to fashion: Poverty and abuse in the new sweatshops* written by Robert J. S. Ross, is recommended. Additionally, several human rights videos have recently become available, including *Sweating for a T-shirt*, *China Blue*, *Made in L.A.*, and *Maquilapolis*. These documentaries are effective in providing added insight into the working conditions in sweatshops both offshore and domestically. In previous classes, the combination of these resources has been found to be instrumental in providing a means for encouraging student activism, in addition to socially responsible apparel purchasing behavior.



This is an excerpt from:

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