

What Countries Are in Your Closet?

by Tricia Donovan

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“What countries are in your closet?” I asked a group of GED learners at the Franklin/Hampshire Employment and Training Consortium in rural Western Massachusetts. My intent was to get students thinking about the impact of world trade and globalization, the loss of manufacturing jobs in the United States, and the lack of unions in developing countries. But I also hoped to get students looking behind the surface of the clothing ads they “consumed” daily so that they might discover who actually made what they wore and under what conditions.

The seven women in the class began squirming this way and that, trying to get a look at their own clothing tags and those of their classmates. Having thought their garments were manufactured mainly in the United States, many were surprised to be calling out names such as Malaysia, Mauritania, and China.

That evening, students went home and collected data on ten items in their closet. For each item, they wrote out the type of clothing, its fabric content, and the name of the country in which it was made. The next day, the class created tables of the data and attempted to convert the tables into graphs. In our efforts to categorize the countries by continents, we discovered that no one could identify the large landmasses. Immediately, the atlas became everyone’s friend. “Hey, Africa is the continent down here with the big bulge.”

“Look here, Japan is just this tiny island off of China...”

“Where’s China?”

“How do you pronounce this country: Ma-lay-sia?”



