Litter

Before you Begin

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines litter as "trash, waste paper, or garbage lying scattered about", and waste as "an unwanted by-product of a manufacturing process, chemical laboratory, or nuclear reactor (these could be toxic, hazardous or nuclear waste)". Waste is also defined by Merriam Webster as "refuse from places of human or animal habitation: such as garbage, rubbish, excrement or sewage".

In general we can understand litter as waste "littered" or "thrown" around. Litter can thus be described as waste products that have been disposed improperly, without consent, at an inappropriate location.

Litter creates toxins and pollutants that are harmful to our environment and animals. Discarded garbage clogs waterways, effects soil, and may remain in landfills for years. Litter may harm the environment and the animals which inhabit it. Animals may ingest pieces of litter like plastics, cigarette butts, or sometimes even be strangled by it. Litter is also a huge problem as it adds to the annual costs of a municipality if not properly disposed in the first place. Litter today has become a problem both on land and in our waterways including oceans.

Litter research by Keep America Beautiful (https://www.kab.org/) has identified seven primary sources of litter:

1. Motorists (debris thrown out of windows by passengers in vehicles including cars, buses, trains, etc).
2. Pedestrians (individual littering of packaging, beverage containers, cigarettes butts, etc.).
3. Household trash on the roadside (leaving lids off trash/ garbage cans; overflowing trash/ garbage cans; unbundled or covered paper that blows, etc.).
4. Dumpsters or large garbage cans used by businesses (overflowing or uncovered trash that invites blowing and spreading).
5. Loading docks/ bays (loading areas in buildings where goods vehicles are loaded and unloaded. Commonly found in commercial and industrial buildings including warehouses).
6. Construction and demolition sites (debris in and around sites and blown by wind or carried by rain).
7. Uncovered trucks (trash/ garbage falling or blowing off open garbage vehicles).

Keep America Beautiful studies on where pedestrians and motorists litter most revealed the following:

- Special event venues - fairs, concerts, game/ matches or other events that attract a large number of people.
- Roadways and highways – road sides, on/off ramps, median strips, and rest stops
- High traffic areas – fast food businesses, convenience stores, picnic or play grounds, stadiums, and other areas with a lot of foot fall.
- Transition points – places where someone stops eating, drinking or smoking before proceeding, such as entrances to buildings, train platforms, and bus stops.

Some of the above reveal that litter is a problem associated more with the behaviour and attitude of people. Different approaches could be adopted to look at the litter problem. Awareness and education in schools, action by different target groups including students and general public and use of different platforms for promoting information. Social media is one such platform which has been looked at in the following lesson plans for creating awareness and taking action with respect to the "litter" problem.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines social media as "Forms of electronic communication (such as Websites) through which people create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, etc." Social media could be utilised as a platform to create and share information. There are many different and popular social media websites like Facebook, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube to name a few. Some examples of how social media platforms have also been used popularly to promote information and run campaigns associated with littering are illustrated below:-

Example 1

The Glasgow city council site http://www.zerowastescotland.org.uk/litter-flytipping/social-media describes how social media sites could be used to prevent litter and fly tipping (used and defined in some countries as the 'illegal deposit of any waste onto land that does not have a licence to accept it'). The Evironment Protection Authority, Victoria site http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/get-involved/report-litter/report-litter-app encourages people to report about Litter with the help of a mobile App.

Example 2

Is a case example of how Product Design students from the Aston University were engaged in a project to design an innovative intervention to prevent littering on Birmingham's streets http://www.aston.ac.uk/news/releases/2016/october/-product-design-hubbub/. Students first researched and understood what motivates people to litter. They moved beyond the classroom to go and observe the littering problem in the city. Working in teams, students had to design a solution that has the potential to change behaviour. Ideas ranged from brightly coloured, seasonally shaped bins that would be placed in the city at key times of year such as Christmas and Easter, to large sticky markings on the floor which resembled chewing gum, and stated facts about the cost of chewing gum disposal. The ideas were implemented in association with a local NGO Hubbub.