



Gambling and Addiction in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Part of what makes us human is our need to be fully ourselves within a larger group—or, as Bruce Alexander describes it, “be free and still belong.” Over time our self-identity develops in relation to the people around us, our connection to our natural environment, and our sense of place in the universe.

When we feel our need for freedom or our desire to belong are not being met, we can lose more than simply our sense of identity—we may lose our way too and get caught up in replacements, such as gambling, drug use, shopping and “a thousand other habits and pursuits.” According to Alexander, “rich and poor alike, compensate for their unbearable lack of culture and identity by desperately clinging to the best substitutes they can find.”

Addiction, therefore, is not really about gambling, drugs or filling our garages with gear and gadgets we rarely use. Instead it’s a reflection of the absence of cultural connectedness and personal identity. It’s about what happens when people can’t connect meaningfully with other people in our increasingly amorphous world. Alexander calls this lack of interconnectedness between the individual and the supportive community “dislocation” and says, “Society cannot control addiction until it stops the spread of dislocation that ultimately instigates it.”

George Orwell, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, anticipates Alexander’s dislocation theory of addiction. This provides teachers with a way to engage students in a critical examination of the social and economic structures of our own time and explore how they influence people’s excessive pursuits of happiness or oblivion.

Instructional strategies

1. Using a self-reflection exercise, introduce the idea of living in a balanced state of *being free still belonging*.
 - a. Invite students to think about the last time they felt they could be 100% themselves around other people. (Where were you? What were you doing? Who were you with? How did you know it was okay to be yourself? How did you feel about it?)
 - b. Then ask students if they’ve ever felt they had to hide or change themselves in order to be accepted into a group. (Why? What was different? How did you know you couldn’t be your true self? How did you feel about it?)
 - c. Invite students to reflect on which is more important: to be free or to belong. (Can you always have both? If you try too hard for one do you lose the other?)

2. Read/distribute/display each of the following quotes from Bruce Alexander and facilitate discussion using questions like those provided.

A wealth of historical, clinical, and quantitative evidence shows that people who lose their identity or their sense of purpose, belonging, or meaning are very likely to become addicted, because addiction provides them with some relief and compensation. Severe addiction, as a kind of exaggerated devotion to an occupation or activity, provides a partial substitute for people who can otherwise be said not to “have a life.”

- a. What do you think Professor Bruce Alexander is saying in this passage?
- b. Reflecting on the passages in the novel that refer to gambling (e.g., Part 1, Chapters vii and viii), would you say the proles “have a life”? Why or why not?
- c. What about Winston?
- d. What’s your take on addiction as a partial substitute for loss of purpose, belonging and meaning?

As markets extend their reach into society, governments extend their ability to manipulate social life in support of them, however much dislocation and addiction may result. The governments of rich countries employ carefully engineered techniques to keep people buying, selling, working, borrowing, lending, consuming, moving, learning, immigrating, reproducing, and saving in ways that seem to maximally benefit the markets, increase gross domestic product, and support the latest economic “recovery.”

Many addicted people contribute in various roles to the further expansion of free-market capitalism and the social fragmentation that it entails, from wasteful “shopaholics” to insatiably greedy CEOs. In these ways, addiction has become a vicious cycle in modern times.

- a. Bruce Alexander is describing modern Western society. How does his description compare with Orwell’s description of society in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? Give examples.
 - b. What government techniques were used to manipulate social life among the proles? What about Party members? Do our governments or other institutions use similar techniques? Discuss any similarities and differences you see.
 - c. What role, do you think, casinos and lotteries play in our society? Is it possible that they are designed to pacify people and keep them in their place by giving them false hope? Why or why not?
 - d. Did the proles in any way contribute to the system that kept them in their place? Are people who become addicted to gambling (or anything else) choosing to contribute to the system that keeps them in their place? If so, why? Explain.
3. Have students write an essay on the following.

Professor Bruce Alexander suggests that real life means to “be free and still belong.” In George Orwell’s novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Part 1, Chapter vii, we read, “If there is hope [wrote Winston] it lies in the proles.” Reflecting on both of these statements in the context of Orwell’s novel and modern society’s problem of addiction, write a short essay entitled, “Where hope lies.”

Gambling competencies

Big idea

- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage gambling in our midst
- We can learn how to control gambling by examining the different ways people have thought about it, engaging in critical self-reflection and listening to each other

Competencies

- Assess the ways in which material goods are distributed in society, how those goods are valued and how this is related to gambling policies and behaviours
- Explore and appreciate the diverse cognitive, social, emotional and physical factors that impact gambling behaviour

For a complete look at the gambling literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: www.uvic.ca/research/centres/carbc/assets/docs/iminds/hs-gambling-curriculum.pdf

Links to Curriculum

First Peoples’ principles of learning

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors



- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions
- Learning requires exploration of one's identity

English Language Arts 11

Big ideas

- The exploration of text and story deepens our understanding of diverse, complex ideas about identity, others, and the world
- Texts are socially, culturally, geographically, and historically constructed
- Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens

Competencies

- Apply appropriate strategies in a variety of contexts to comprehend written, oral, visual, and multimodal texts; guide inquiry; and extend thinking
- Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- Recognize personal, social, and cultural contexts, as well as values and perspectives in texts, including race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, place
- Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world
- Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways
- Respectfully exchange ideas and viewpoints from diverse perspectives to build shared understanding and extend thinking
- Demonstrate speaking and listening skills in a variety of formal and informal contexts for a range of purposes
- Select and apply an appropriate spoken language format for an intended purpose
- Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create engaging and meaningful literary, imaginative, and informational texts for a variety of purposes and audiences
- Express and support an opinion with credible evidence

Sources

Alexander, B. (2008). *The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Alexander, B. (2010). Dislocation Theory of Addiction. Retrieved from <http://www.brucealexander.com/articles-speeches/dislocation-theory-addiction/250-change-of-venue-3>

Alexander, B. (2016). Replacing the Official View of Addiction. In J. E. Davis & A. M. Gonzalez (Eds.), *To Fix or to Heal: Patient Care, Public Health, and the Limits of Biomedicine*. New York: New York University Press.