

Prioritizing Our Wants, Step by Step

Suzanne Gallagher and Shannon Hodges

The first step in helping students learn to make more careful decisions is not to teach them to divide all alternatives into “needs” and “wants,” but rather to give them some decision-making tools. Using these tools can help them use their resources more effectively by helping them learn to prioritize their economic wants. (See the preceding article.) Here are four activities to guide students as they learn to use decision-making tools.

Activity 1 helps students recognize that resources are scarce, and thus they will be making choices every day of their lives

Activity 2 helps students learn that every choice involves an opportunity cost (see Activity 2).

Activity 3 helps students list alternatives and weight the costs and benefits of each (see Activity 3).

Activity 4 has students practice prioritizing their wants, based on the costs and benefits of each item.

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Activity 1: Dealing With Scarcity

1. Set up a scarcity situation. For example, involve students in an art project that requires scissors—and be sure to have only a few pairs of scissors available.
2. Put the scissors on a table and tell students to come and get the scissors when they are ready to use them.
3. When students are frustrated by the scarcity of scissors, stop the project for a discussion. Ask them to describe the problem. Ask how they are deciding who gets the scissors, which at this point is probably “first come, first served.” Ask if there are other ways to handle the scarcity. (Examples: the teacher decides; pairs of students share scissors; taking turns; set up a lottery; sign out-sign in, like a library).
4. Guide students to the conclusion that they are facing a scarce resource. Define scarcity as “the inability to satisfy all of our wants at the same time.” Because of scarcity, we can’t have everything we want. We must make choices. (“Scarcity is the condition of not being able to have all of the goods and services that one wants. It exists because human wants for goods and services exceed the quantity of goods and services that can be produced using all available resources.”— *Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics*.)
5. Ask students for examples of times in their lives when things were scarce. Discuss what happened in each situation presented. Ask whether they had to make a choice.
6. Allow students to finish the art project, employing their preferred method of sharing scissors.
7. Optional: Ask each student to write a paragraph describing a time when something was scarce and describe what choice was made.



Activity 2: What's My Opportunity Cost?

1. "Pay" students for some work they have done (e.g. completing homework, cleaning out desks) so that each student has one classroom dollar.
2. Lay out approximately 35 or 40 attractive items (equivalent to about ten items from each of four categories, such as cookies, stickers, pencils, and coupons for lunch with the teacher). You'll need about ten of each item.
3. Remind students that all choices have costs and that the opportunity cost is what is given up when a choice is made.
4. Ask for one volunteer who will help you to demonstrate the activity. Ask that student which two things he/she would like to have.
5. Let the student hold the two treats. Then explain that each item costs a classroom dollar. Ask the student to choose which item he or she wants to purchase, and make the transaction. The student pays the dollar, keeps one item, and replaces the other.
6. Ask students what economists call the item that was given up. Have the demonstrator say, "My choice is _____. I'm giving up _____, and that's my *opportunity cost*."
7. Ask remaining students to begin thinking about their choices so they will know what they want when their turn comes. Bring up students in small groups to make their selections. Have each one say, "My choice is _____. I'm giving up _____, and that's my opportunity cost." Each child will get to keep his/her choice.
8. Afterward, ask students to share why they made the choices they did. The opportunity cost concept can be assessed informally as each student responds to his/her choice. Afterward, higher-level questions can be asked to assess deeper understanding. For example, a second grade teacher might ask her students to describe possible opportunity costs Christopher Columbus experienced when he chose to begin his explorations. (Maybe he could have chosen to be a merchant in Madrid, or a grape grower in Barcelona.)



Activity 3: Comparing Costs and Benefits

1. Ask children to write down a choice they made during the week (ex., chocolate versus regular milk for lunch, going to the movies versus going to the pool, choosing with whom to sit on the bus). Then have them list what was given up as a result of that choice.
2. Draw a chart on the board, showing some of the students' names, choices made, and items (or events) given up.
3. After several examples are charted, read the following sentence as a demonstration: "Jonathan chose the movies and gave up going swimming. Swimming was his opportunity cost." Ask further questions regarding students' choices such as, "Jonathan, what were the benefits of going to the movies? Why did you choose it over swimming?"
4. Summarize verbally the student's comments: "The benefit of going to the movies was that Jonathan thought he would enjoy it, and this was the last day that particular movie would be playing at the theater. He thought the benefit of the movie was higher than the benefit of swimming, because he can go swimming any day. He chose to go to movies, leaving swimming as his opportunity cost."
5. Repeat this process with several students. Then give the writing assignment below. Older students can be asked to formulate their responses into a paragraph.

NAME: _____

I CHOSE TO: _____

I GAVE UP: _____

Answer these questions about a choice you have made recently.

1. What were the two alternatives?
A. _____ B. _____
2. What were the benefits of choice "A"? _____

3. What were the benefits of choice "B"? _____

4. Which alternative did you choose? _____
5. What was the opportunity cost of that choice? _____

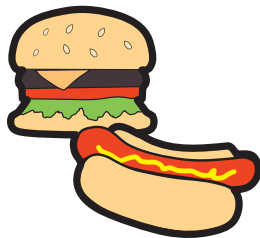
Activity 4: Setting Priorities and Sharing Resources

1. Prepare enough camping item cards for each student to have one of each item (water, food, tent, extra clothing, sleeping bag, flashlight, and—humorously—candy and iPod). Then organize stacks of water cards, food cards, etc.
2. Explain to the class that prioritizing means taking care of the most important things first. For example, if you are playing at recess and someone falls and breaks his leg, do you continue playing or do you get help for the injured student? Students would likely conclude that the priority at that time would be to assist the injured student.
3. After that discussion, ask the students to imagine that they are going on a weeklong camping trip, but that they will only have five minutes to pack, so there will not be time to gather everything they want. Reveal the camping cards and describe what items are available. Remind students that they should pack the most important things first.
4. In round 1, each child comes to the front and picks up one card. When all have returned to their seats, proceed to round 2, during which each child chooses a second item.
5. Continue on with rounds until each student has chosen four items.
6. Begin a discussion by asking how many students packed water. Explain that a person can only live two to three days without water.
7. Ask how many students chose food. How comfortable would they be with an iPod, but no food?
8. Ask students if there were any items they still wanted, but did not have time to pack.
9. Continue with a discussion of their choices and priorities. Construct a chart on the board:
 - Which items did students choose most often?
 - Which items did they choose least often?
 - Which items could have been eliminated from the choices?
10. Ask students why it might be an advantage to plan for a camping trip as a team, with two or three other children? Why might the members of group actually fair better, in the face of scarcity, than would an individual? (If students could plan to choose complementary items, and then share some items at the campsite, they might be more comfortable. One student could bring a flashlight and share it, allowing others to bring more food.)

Water



FOOD



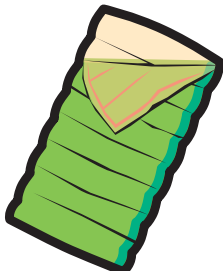
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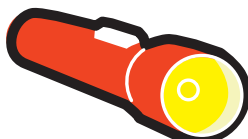
**extra
CLOTHING**



**SLEEPING
BAG**



FLASHLIGHT



CANDY



iPOD

