

Economics Is for Everyone: A FETCHing Graphic Organizer

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Although centuries have passed since Plato stated, “Necessity is the mother of invention,” this concept is alive and well in the teaching profession today. Every innovative method and activity that I’ve developed in my classroom can, in some way, be traced back to a need that was not being met by traditional methods or the many ready-made lesson plans available free and for sale. The pull of necessity was never stronger than when I attempted to introduce economic concepts to fourth and fifth grade students.

On the first day back from the summer, I received my new class roster. I had been assigned to a fifth grade class in which approximately one third of the students had “special education resource” needs. I was no stranger to inclusion and mainstreaming, having helped many special education students achieve success, but the large percentage of students needing modifications in teaching methods and materials for this one period caused me to doubt my lesson plans. I had been planning to teach an integrated unit of study on elementary economics. Despite my new worries, I decided to move forward as planned, making modifications to the lessons as necessary once I observed the abilities and personalities of my students.

How It Began

I introduced the study of economics to my students through children’s literature. I began by reading aloud from a favorite juvenile fiction novel which contained embedded economic concepts. Students and teacher alike enjoy this low-pressure activity. It gives us a common narrative to discuss or refer to during other times of the school day. After encountering an economic concept and explaining it to the students, I formally defined the economic concept during our math or reading time, and discussed it further with the children. Upon completing the book, I had introduced four basic economic concepts. The students seemed to understand these concepts, but I wanted to provide an activity in which they would demonstrate their understanding and apply it to the study of history. So I developed a graphic organizer.

A Graphic Organizer

A graphic organizer is a visual representation designed to assist in learning.¹ Graphic organizers provide a framework in which students relate their existing knowledge to new information.²

“Economics is the study of how people use their limited resources to satisfy wants and needs.”

Teachers may lead students in the production of the graphic from scratch, or may provide a graphic outline with open cells and guide students as they add important information to the framework. Graphic organizers can be used in many different settings.³ Students’ organizing skills improve and retention of content increases when this method is used.⁴

I developed the FETCH organizer to relate economic concepts and topics in history. FETCH stands for “Finding Economic Topics and Concepts in History.”

The FETCH graphic organizer developed from classroom discussions. In order for young students to understand the basic definition of economics, I had created a short definition for classroom use: “Economics is the study of how people use their limited resources to satisfy wants and needs.” During history lessons, I often wrote this definition across the board and asked probing questions related to the history topic at hand:

- ▶ Who was involved?
- ▶ What did they need, and why?
- ▶ What might they want, and why?
- ▶ What resources were available?
- ▶ How were these resources used?

How the Organizer Evolved

While using the FETCH graphic organizer was not the sole focus of the lesson, discussing what went into the organizer did become a daily part of our history lessons. My student classroom helpers began leaving the definition of economics across the top of the board, rather than erasing it with everything else at the end of the day. In the fifth grade, students are studying colonial and early U.S. history. Using the FETCH graphic organizer helped students think about the economic conditions and personal motivations that led to such momentous events as the discovery of America, the establishment of the slave trade, and the American Revolution.

From a teacher-led activity on the board, the strategy evolved into a discussion with a student writing activity. Student would first write the definition of economics across

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Economics and History

“Economics” is the study of How PEOPLE use their LIMITED RESOURCES to satisfy their WANTS/NEEDS for GOODS/SERVICES.

Historic Event:

Who was involved?

PEOPLE

What want or need did they have?

WANTS and NEEDS

What resources were available?

LIMITED RESOURCES
[Human / Natural / Capital]

What good or service was provided?

GOODS and SERVICES

Economics and History

“Economics” is the study of How PEOPLE use their LIMITED RESOURCES to satisfy their WANTS/NEEDS for GOODS/SERVICES.

Historic Event: Spanish Exploration

Who was involved?

Queen Isabel of Spain
Christopher Columbus
Spanish citizens (royalty, business, and commoners)
Other rival nations
Native inhabitants of the colonies

What want or need did they have?

Europeans desired materials from overseas such as foods (sugar, tea, spices) and raw materials (gold, silver, lumber, other metals)

A shorter trade route to the East to provide these goods

What resources were available?

Spain could build ships and provide expert sailors.

Spain did not possess all of the raw materials or laborers that it desired.

What good or service was provided?

Columbus failed to find a shorter route to the East, but he “discovered” a whole continent!
New Spanish colonies could provide foods, raw materials, and slaves to perform hard labor (on sugar plantations, for example)

the top of their papers, and then organize points of our discussion in rough columns under the different terms within the definition (for example, “people,” “resources,” “wants,” “needs”). These student FETCH organizers not only reinforced the economic topics and concepts, but became informal study guides for students to use when preparing for a test (See Handout 1).

It is not necessary to fill-in every cell within an organizer. Some historical events or topics don't involve both wants and needs, both goods and services, or may involve only one type of natural or human resource. The underlying purpose of the FETCH strategy is to reinforce comprehension of economic topics and concepts through repeated application to historical events—not to create a perfectly symmetrical chart. See the example of a FETCH Chart filled out in Handout 2.

By the end of the year, I had moved the strategy to a mimograph sheet consisting of a hand-drawn series of boxes underneath the simple definition of a term.

Success of an Idea

I sensed that I was on to something during parent-teacher conference time when more than one parent expressed surprise that their children were studying economics and how much they were learning while reviewing work with their children.


Since that first year, I have used FETCH charts, incorporating economics topics and concepts into my history classes every day. I have experimented with multiple text boxes and additional questions, but ultimately arrived at the current form shown here.

Lessons Learned

What did I learn by teaching economics to young children over several years? I learned that every student is capable of

learning some basic economic concepts. Economics surrounds us every day. A student makes an economic decision each time he or she chooses one flavor of ice cream over another, decides to save some money to be able to purchase a video game in the future, or purchases a ticket at a movie theater today rather than watching a DVD tomorrow.

I also learned that economics is intimately tied to history. Economic motivations are among the causes of many actions of historical figures and social movements. Sharing examples from history allows me to reinforce economic concepts with students.

Finally, I learned that economics is for everyone at every age; that economics is not only for adults as they purchase homes, invest for retirement, or pursue higher education. Using the FETCH graphic organizer is one way in which teachers can help change this misconception and further the cause of economic education.⁵ 

Notes

1. Kim Ae-hwa, S. Vaughn, J. Wanzek, and S. Wei, “Graphic Organizers and Their Effects on the Reading Comprehension of Students with LD: A Synthesis of Research,” *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 37 (2004): 105-118.
2. David P. Ausubel, *The Psychology of Meaningful Verbal Learning* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1963).
3. Margaret Egan, “Reflections on Effective Use of Graphic Organizers,” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 42 (1999): 641-645.
4. Brad Baxendell, “Consistent, Coherent, Creative: The 3 C’s of Graphic Organizers,” *Journal of Exceptional Children* 35 (2003): 46-53.
5. A short summer course at Arkansas State University in 1992 changed my attitude toward economic education. During the daily classes, I was exposed to the thoughts of experts in the field of economics and then invited to apply my new knowledge to elementary lessons, creating lessons and activities with teachers who taught at the same grade levels. I left the summer program inspired about economic education and teaching in general. For me, it was professional development at its best.

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