



POWELL CENTER FOR
ECONOMIC LITERACY

Lesson Plan

WRITTEN BY
Jim Flaherty
Harambee Christian School
Columbus, OH
Last Modified: November 14, 2008

The Language of Knockout: An Intelligent Response to Playground Scarcity

Time Required

15 Minutes plus one week of timing events during recess.

Grade Level and Subject

Elementary School; Recess

Keystone Principles

[Principle #1](#), We All Make Choices

[Principle #3](#), Choices Have Consequences

[Principle #5](#), Incentives Produce “Predictable” Responses

Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics

[Standard #1](#) – People cannot have all the goods and services they want; they must choose some things and give up others.

[Standard #2](#) – People respond predictably to positive and negative incentives.

Economic Concepts

Choice - A selection among alternatives. Scarcity requires individuals, businesses and nations to make choices.

Consequence - A result or effect of an action or decision; may be positive or negative.

Incentive - Any reward or benefit, such as money, advantage or good feeling, that motivates people to do something.

Scarcity - The condition that occurs because people’s wants and needs are unlimited,

Collegiate School ★ North Mooreland Road ★ Richmond, Virginia 23229

telephone (804) 741-2806 facsimile (804) 740-6701 www.powellcenter.org

while the resources needed to produce goods and services to meet these wants and needs are limited.

Overview

I have a class that enjoys arguing on the playground perhaps as much as playing. Their favorite game is called “Knockout”, a basketball game in which a students challenge each other to be the first to get the ball through the hoop. I used economic language and concepts to help students understand that the time they spent arguing was robbing them of their allotted playground time. We used an incentive approach to develop a solution to the problem.

Don’t worry if you don’t play this game – any competitive activity in which the children have difficulty with the rules of good sportsmanship will benefit from this lesson.

Objectives

- Students will take a studied look at time scarcity as directly related to their recess.
- Students will understand that some undesirable consequences are the natural, even if unintended, result of some poor choices they have made.
- Students will evaluate the trade-off between the consequences of following school behavior policy (more recess time) and the consequences of inappropriate behavior (shortened recess time).
- Students will gain an understanding of the economic principle that people respond predictably to incentives and disincentives.

Materials and Handouts

None

Teaching Activity

Background Information

- Our school has ten rules of behavior and one of them is to be a good sport. This lesson is an economic approach to having the children solve their own problem of breaking the good sport rule almost constantly on the playground.
- How to play “Knockout.”
 - To play Knockout, you only need a basketball and a hoop. Students line up single-file behind the freethrow line. The first student is given a basketball and tried to shoot the ball through the hoop. If (s)he makes it, (s)he gets the rebound, throws the ball to the next student in line, and then proceeds to the back of the line. The second student repeats the process and so forth. The first student to make the shot “Knocks Out” all the preceding shooters who missed, hence the name of the game.
 - My students love the game and ask to play it often. Initially, a great deal of time on the playground was spent in the drama that ensued from a missed shot. Not only were excuses made for one’s own miss, but the

complaints would frequently escalate into bullying accusations that other students caused the missed shot. Although my observation was that most of those accusations were fabricated, the back and forth arguments and posturing wasted a big chunk of our 15-minute recess. The students still waiting their turn became extremely frustrated as the recess time ticked away and they realized they might not get their opportunity to be the shooter. It quickly became apparent that the recess time which should have allowed students to expend some energy and develop athletic skills was instead instilling frustration and resentment to varying degrees.

An Economic Approach

- I saw this as an opportunity to interject economic reasoning into the situation and use it to help the students understand that their behavior was counter-productive.
- I asked a student who wasn't playing the game to be my assistant. We used a stopwatch to record the amount of time spent not playing the game with each outburst. That time was added up and subtracted from the total time of the recess. We did this for a week and got an average for the amount of time wasted.
- The following week I asked my assistant to announce our findings to the class. They were horrified by how much time they were wasting.
- After revealing our findings, I had the following discussion with my class. I wanted to help the students make a connection between their choice to act out and the resulting loss of recess time which occurred, not through my intervention, but as the natural consequence of their own choices. I instituted a penalty for breaking the school rule of good sportsmanship in order to help reinforce their understanding of how to use incentives to attain desired results. Because they all agreed they wanted the benefit of the full recess period, they could accept that the penalty would actually help them achieve their goal of maximizing playground time. They were also able to realize that the incentive was not primarily punitive, but an effort to give those who wanted to play the game an unhindered opportunity to do so. The important thing was consistency in its enforcement. Although I can't say my students don't argue anymore, this process has made a noticeable difference!

- **Q:** Who likes to play knockout at recess?
A: (Most hands raised.)
- **Q:** Who would rather argue than play knockout on the playground?
A: (No hands raised.)
- **Q:** How much time do you get for afternoon recess?
A: Fifteen minutes.
- **Q:** Do you know how much time you spent arguing during recess yesterday afternoon?
A: No.
- **Q:** You argued a total of eight minutes. Is that more or less than half of fifteen minutes?
A: More.
- **Q:** You just told me that you like to play more than fight with each other.

How do you explain this fact?

A: (No answer.)Q: How much of your recess time do you think you spend arguing?A: A lot.

- Q: Is this situation acceptable to you? Do you value arguing more than playing?

A: No!

- Q: Do you have an unlimited recess period?

A: No.

- Q: What do we call wanting more that we have the resources to satisfy?

A: Scarcity.

- Q: What do people do when faced with scarcity?

A: Make choices.

- Q: Who likes to lose at knockout?

A: Nobody.

- Q: Would you agree that this is the main reason that you argue during recess?

A: Yes.

- Q: Let's decide what to say when we lose and what to say when we win. We will only say these things, control our hearts, and play more. Ok?

A: Ok.

- Q: You are happy when you win, right? But are you happy that your friends lose?

A: No.

- Q: If you feel sorry that your friends get knocked out, what could we all say?

A: "I'm sorry. You'll do better next time."

- Q: Would you like to say this when your friend loses?

A: Ok.

- Q: What should a person who just won or just knocked you out say?

A: Nothing!

- Q: What should we say to someone who just won?

A: "Good game."

(Have your students repeat these phrases several times. Ask for agreement on them as the *lingua franca* of the playground.)

- Q: Does anyone remember the economic principle about incentives?

A: People respond predictably to incentives.

- Q: Good. Would you like me to help you get more time to play and less time to argue on the playground?

A: Yes!

- Q: Good. From today on anyone who is a bad sport in winning or losing at a game on the playground will lose the rest of that recess and all the next. Being a good sport is a rule of our school and we all know what to say now. Right?

A: Right.

- **Teacher:** Enjoy your next recess!