

Let's Teach Students to Prioritize: Reconsidering "Wants" and "Needs"

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Early on, children learn they can't have everything they desire. In an effort to help them make better choices, teachers will make a list of items that students desire, and then divide those items into two categories—wants and needs ("needs" being things that are necessary to support life; "wants" being possessions that one could survive without).

This division might seem an easy one to make. Certainly, the process of making the distinction between wants and needs has become a staple of the kindergarten social studies curriculum. We suggest it's not quite so easy to make this distinction, and we invite readers to consider whether trying to do so actually takes the emphasis away from helping students learn real decision-making skills.

Thinking about Wants and Needs

In many classrooms, the process of making the distinction between a "want" and a "need" has become an act of memorization. Students can tell you that our needs are food, clothing, and shelter. If asked to categorize items as wants or needs, they can easily place (for some examples) the correct picture under the correct heading. We wonder, however, whether this focus on classification overlooks the higher-order thinking skills we want our students to develop.

Of course, it's tempting to think we can improve student decision making by simply dividing alternatives into "needs" and "wants," but this actually presents several challenges. Consider the following list. Try marking the wants "w" and the needs "n."

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|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| _____ Milkshake | _____ Levi jeans |
| _____ Bottled water | _____ College education |
| _____ Bath soap | _____ Haircut |
| _____ Toothpaste | _____ Nike shoes |
| _____ Peanut butter sandwich | _____ Apartment |
| _____ Disney T-shirt | _____ One-bedroom house |
| _____ Visit to the doctor | _____ Three-bedroom house |
| _____ Dictionary | _____ Economy car |
| _____ Bicycle | _____ Mini-van |
| _____ Apple | _____ Cell phone |

Did you have trouble deciding which items were "needs" and which were "wants"? What if you were asked to simply review the list and circle the items that would be needs under this definition: Our basic needs are for food, shelter, and clothing. Perhaps an item you labeled earlier as a "need" (such as a visit to a medical doctor or a bar of soap) is not a member of one of these sets: food, shelter, or clothing. It's easy to see that what one person deems to be an absolute necessity may not be considered a essential by someone else.

A Useful Discussion?

When this list was presented to a group of children, most went quickly through it on their own. Then, when asked to share their answers with others, it was clear they did not all agree. Some students considered the t-shirt to be clothing and therefore a "need." Others argued that kids do not need Disney t-shirts. One child responded, "I'm allergic to peanuts, so I definitely wouldn't want or need a peanut butter sandwich." Another child argued strongly that doctors' visits are needed if we are looking for things that help us survive. Suppose we think about children in other parts of the world. Would anything on the list above be considered a "need" for the child who only hopes to get a cup of cooked rice and a drink of clean water?

Thus, it's clear that distinguishing between wants and needs is an artificial distinction. Needs are subjective. When we define "needs" simply as food, clothing, and shelter and "wants" as everything else, where do we put things such as eyeglasses, a car, health care, and education? Are restaurant meals and designer coats considered "needs" since they are food and clothing? Does a resident of a city with good public transportation need a car? Does a family living 10 miles outside of a small town need a car?



The terms “resources” and “sustainability” are constantly in the news. Two Ecuadoran children, Lourdes Fiomena Cutiopala and her sister Lisbet Rufina Cutiopala, are shown here with a rabbit in 2003, near the village of San Martin. The farmers terrace their land, use manure for the animals to improve crop production, built irrigation systems to help water the crops, and try out other activities to generate income. Heifer uses alpacas and rabbits, tree seedlings, and other tools in the highlands to help farmers. Learn about Heifer’s educational resources at www.heifer.org. Click on “Learn.” Photo courtesy: Heifer International/Darcy Kiefel

Reaching consensus on what constitutes a “want” versus a “need” is probably impossible. Classroom time would be better spent helping students develop good analytical skills, a task which is both possible and vital. Such skills will be useful to them as consumers making economic choices, and as citizens considering public policy alternatives.

Thoughtful Choices

The discipline of economics is not primarily about memorizing terms (although some memorization is part of any learning). It’s about empowering people to make thoughtful choices. We should be helping our children learn to think about what they want most, to consider the resources they have available, and then to thoughtfully prioritize their lists to obtain those things of utmost importance to them. Isn’t learning this process a much more valuable lesson than asking students to memorize that “needs” are food, clothing, and shelter—while everything else is a “want”?

There is no mention of the term “need” in the Council

for Economic Education’s *National Voluntary Economics Standards*. Standard One, on the topic of scarcity, states, “Students will understand that productive resources are limited. Therefore, people cannot have all the goods and services they want; as a result, they must choose some things and give up others.” It goes on to define economic wants as “desires that can be satisfied by consuming a good, service, or leisure activity.”¹ “Need” is not an economic concept. Economics is about making choices that use one’s resources efficiently, effectively, and thoughtfully in order to acquire goods and services that one values most.

Resource Scarcity

Differentiating between needs and wants takes the focus off the understanding we really want students to have. Because resources are scarce, it is important to use them thoughtfully. That is the vital lesson. The term “resources” is constantly in the news, often referring to depleting resources, diverting resources, and the need to combine resources. Economic

resources include: *natural resources* (gifts of nature), *physical capital* (man-made things used to produce goods and services), *human resources* (human input, especially labor, skills, experience, and knowledge— called “human capital”) and *entrepreneurship* (the skill of bringing other resources together to produce goods and services in new and better ways). Students must learn that resources are scarce, and as a result, they cannot have everything they want. Because of this condition of scarcity, consumers, producers, and governments will always be forced to make hard choices. Thoughtful decision-making skills can be helpful in making those choices, and those are skills that can be learned. Since habits are formed early, it makes sense to start teaching some of these skills even to young students.

Opportunity Cost

Students must make thoughtful choices about how they use resources if they want to be good stewards of the world’s scarce resources, as well as their own. Choices matter. Students must recognize that every choice involves a cost. When we choose to do one thing, we give up the opportunity to do something else. “The opportunity cost of a choice is the value of the best alternative given up.”² The forgone choice—the next best thing that we did not choose—is the “opportunity cost.”

The concept of opportunity cost can be illustrated easily even with young students. Have each of them color pictures on both sides of a page. Then explain to them that they must choose one picture to display on the wall, and cover the reverse side with tape, thus making that picture unavailable. For some, the decision will be easier than for others, but all of them will clearly see that the opportunity cost of displaying the chosen picture is the second picture, now hidden by the wall.³

Costs and Benefits

A key part of decision-making is weighing costs and benefits. Some of the basics of this sort of decision-making can be taught at the elementary level.

“Benefits” are the good things you expect to enjoy from the choice that you make. “Costs” are the things you give up to when you choose one path over another. As we all know, life is full of choices, all of which involve costs.

For example, a young family might have to choose how to spend a four-day vacation: at the beach by themselves or in the mountains with Grandma? The family members must weigh the costs and benefits. Their physical and human resources are limited. They cannot be in both places for those four days, so they have to make a choice. If we go to Grandma’s, the cost of that choice is the fun we would have had at the beach. The benefit is the enjoyment we will have in the mountains with Grandma. People generally make better decisions when they compare alternatives and weigh the cost and benefits of each before they decide.

Careful Decisions

Thus, 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.

Step one is to help students recognize that resources are scarce, and thus they will be making choices every day of their lives (see Activity 1 in the Pullout).

The second step will be learning that every choice involves an opportunity cost (see Activity 2).

Third, they will learn to list their alternatives and weight the costs and benefits of each (see Activity 3).

Finally, using that information, they will practice prioritizing their wants, based on the costs and benefits of each (see Activity 4).

In summary, it’s important for students to recognize that they can’t have everything they want, and to understand that this is because resources are scarce. As a result, they, like everyone else, will be forced to make choices every day. Teaching children to consider costs and benefits, prioritize their wants, and make thoughtful, informed choices will be far more valuable than having them memorize the phrase “needs are food, shelter, and clothing.”

As educators, it is our job to provide guidance and opportunities to empower our students become good thinkers.⁴ Developing the habit of thoughtful decision making early will be valuable as they continue making choices every day as consumers, producers, savers, borrowers, investors, and voters. So, let’s help students become good thinkers—teaching them to gather information, list the alternatives, reflect on costs and benefits, and prioritize the options—not merely to memorize. 🌐

Notes

1. National Council on Economic Education, *Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics* (New York: NCEE, 1997): 1-41. NCEE has become the Council on Economic Education (CEE).
2. NCEE, 1.
3. Older children might consider the opportunity cost of purchasing bottled water, when drinking water flows freely from the tap. “What could you buy at the end of the summer for \$100?”
4. The authors wish to thank the following economic educators for their insights on this issue: Jim Charkins, California State University San Bernardino; Doug Haskell, University of Cincinnati; Bonnie Meszaros, University of Delaware; Ed Millner, Virginia Commonwealth University; and Mary Suiter, St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank.

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