



# The River Trip Packing Lesson: Engaging High School Students in Basic Economic Principles on Day One

To support high school economic educators, we have created an interactive, first-day lesson plan that introduces students to key principles of economic thinking. The lesson plan and related instructional materials can be accessed at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1L9gtbA06tYucx9b3gET13wG26NfAgtwa566-E6egJTs/edit?usp=sharing>.

**Kathleen Cusack<sup>†</sup> Megan Kirts<sup>†</sup>**

<sup>†</sup>Econiful

## **1. Introduction**

The first day with students is crucial when it comes to setting the right tone and introducing students to economics as a field of study. The assessments students make about their instructors within the first minutes of meeting remain constant throughout the course (Acchiardo & Mateer, 2015). Conversations with students and colleagues, as well as research, tell us that economics teachers have an even more challenging first day because many students have significant misconceptions about what economics is and assumptions about how economics will be taught (Acchiardo & Mateer, 2015). Unfortunately, some of these challenges are due to the long-standing and widespread reliance on chalk and talk in economics courses (Asarta, Chambers, & Harter, 2020).

Fortunately, there are high-quality lessons available that work to correct student misconceptions about economics and to introduce key concepts in an interesting manner such as the National Council on Economic Education's "Economic Magic: Creating Something From Nothing," "Why Are We a Nation of Couch Potatoes?," and "Why People Trade?" as well as "Health Care in the United States [and] Health Care Issues"—a lesson plan in which students must prioritize the patients to receive dialysis—from the Education Resources Information Center (Lewis & Dempsey, 1984; Lopus et al., 2003; Lopus et al., 2008a; Lopus et al., 2008b). Packing For A River Trip is another option for economic educators looking to actively engage their students as economic thinkers from the first day of class.

We designed this lesson to serve as an ice-breaker for economics, centered around a series of decisions that students can relate to. From the first moments of the class, students' inaccurate or negative impressions of the discipline can be transformed as they actively participate in the lesson (Acchiardo & Mateer, 2015).

## **2. Approach and Rationale**

When creating Packing For A River Trip: An Introduction to Economics we focused on three research-supported elements of effective instruction; active student participation, real-world applicability, and progression toward the transfer of knowledge and skills (Acchiardo & Mateer, 2015; Wiggins 2016; Bayer et al., 2019; Wolfers; 2019; Asarta et al., 2020; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2020).

To actively engage students, the lesson asks them to make decisions related to a concept that is easily accessible to all students - packing (Bayer et al., 2019; Asarta et al., 2020). Everyone beyond early childhood has some degree of experience with the concept of packing, whether it be for a move, a trip, or simply packing items to bring to the first day of school. Although many students are unlikely to have packed for a river trip, they will easily transfer their understanding of packing decisions to the river trip scenario. Because research indicates that students are more able to retrieve and retain information when they actively participate in their learning we require every student to participate in the decision-making process as pairs determine what items are most important to bring on the river trip (Asarta, et al., 2020; Brown, et al., 2014; Freeman, et al., 2014; Picault, 2019; Prince, 2004).

Through this series of decisions, students experience economics as a set of analytical tools that enables informed decision-making beyond the classroom (Wolfers, 2019). During the debrief discussion teachers introduce four basic principles of economic thinking (cost-benefit, opportunity cost, marginal, and interdependence principles) that can be used to frame all elements of an introductory economics course and more importantly, all decisions that students face in the course of their everyday lives (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2020). When students begin to see the relevance between what they are learning in their economics class and the

world at large it incentivizes them to explore economics more deeply (Wolfers, 2019).

This first-day lesson lays the foundation for transfer by preparing students to take what they have learned in the classroom and apply it to novel contexts both in and out of school (Bain, 2004; Wiggins, 2016). The lesson encourages educators to explicitly highlight the economics in everyday decision-making which can reframe students' perception of the course from a requirement grudgingly fulfilled to a source of curiosity and wonder. When students are more engaged in their economics class, they are more likely to apply the tools of economic thinking to their personal, professional, and civic decision-making (Wolfers, 2019).

### **3. Lesson Overview**

#### *Step 1 - Hook the Students and Frame the Lesson*

Pique students' interest by asking them to consider what they think they might need to pack for a multi-day river trip. This question is sure to catch students off-guard on the first day of an economics course and provide all students with an opportunity to contribute to the conversation regardless of their previous economic experience. Once you have student buy-in, connect the activator question to the learning objective for the lesson (explain the role scarcity plays in decision-making). Tell students they will have 20 square feet on their raft for gear beyond oars, food, a table, and basic clothing. Emphasize that students will think like economists as they determine what to pack to stay safe and enjoy a multi-day river trip through the Grand Canyon.

#### *Step 2 - Group Work*

Students work in pairs to determine what items, from the list provided, they will pack in their 20 square feet of space while adhering to the rules included in the activity. Because space is limited and both students' individual preferences must be accounted for, conversations will naturally include examples of opportunity cost, cost-benefit analysis, thinking at the margin, incentives, risk tolerance, and interdependence. Pairs record their final decisions on the provided raft handout. If preferred, this activity can also be done in a Google Sheet provided with the lesson.

#### *Step 3 - Debrief*

Pairs jot down their thoughts on five debrief questions before the whole-class debrief. Thus, students are better prepared to share their responses with the class. During the whole-class debrief, students are formally introduced to four key principles of economic thinking (cost-benefit, opportunity cost, marginal, and interdependence principles) which serve as a foundation for the semester (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2020).

#### *Step 4 - Summarizer*

Students respond to two questions (What misconceptions did you have about economics? What additional understanding did you gain about economics?) to engage them in metacognition, reinforce their learning, and prepare them to dive deeper into what economists do and the principles of economic thinking in the following lessons.

#### *Bonus - Spotlight Student Work*

Collect completed *Raft Handouts* from pairs and display them in the classroom. Showcasing student work is not just for aesthetics; it maximizes the utility of classroom space to enhance retention and accountability (Barrett et al., 2015). Displaying student work enables

teachers and students to refer back to prior lessons throughout the unit to build upon students' understanding of the principles of economic thinking.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on our conversations with educators who have implemented this lesson, Packing For A River Trip is easily adapted to suit the needs of middle school and college-level principles courses. The lesson has been well received by students at multiple grade levels. Educators appreciated that the lesson provided a tangible anchor for an introductory unit and laid a strong foundation for an economics course that expects and encourages students to think like economists.

## References

Acchiardo, C., & Mateer, G. D. 2015 First impressions: Why the first day matters. *Perspectives on Economic Education Research*, 9(2), 1-9.

Asarta, C., Chambers, R., & Harter, C. 2020. Teaching methods in undergraduate introductory economics courses: Results from a sixth national quinquennial survey. *The American Economist*, 1-11. DOI: [10.1177/056943452097465](https://doi.org/10.1177/056943452097465)

Bain, K. 2004. *What the best college teachers do*. Harvard University Press.

Barrett, P., Davies, F., Zhang, Y., & Barrett, L. 2015. The impact of classroom design on pupils' learning: Final results of a holistic, multi-level analysis. *Building and Environment*, 89, 118–133. DOI: [10.1016/j.buildenv.2015.02.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2015.02.013)

Bayer, A., Kalemli-Özcan, Ş., Pande R., Rouse, C. E., Smith, A. A., Suárez Serrato, J. C., & Wilcox, D. W. 2019. Best practices for economists: Building a more diverse, inclusive, and productive profession. *American Economic Association*. <https://www.aeaweb.org/resources/best-practices> (accessed September 4, 2023) DOI: [10.1257/pandp.111.824](https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.111.824)

Brown, P. C., Roediger, H. L. III, & McDaniel, M. A. 2014. *Make it stick: The science of successful learning*. Harvard University Press.

Freeman, F., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H. & Wenderotha, M. P. 2014. Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(23), 8410-8415. DOI: [10.1073/pnas.1319030111](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1319030111)

Lewis, J., & Dempsey, J. R. (n.d.). ERIC - ED258871 - Health care in the United States [and] health care issues: A lesson plan., *Connections: Joint Council on Economic Education Newsletter*, 1984. *Connections: Joint Council on Economic Education Newsletter*, 5(2).

Lopus, J. S., Morton, J. S., Reinke, R., Schug, M. C., & Wentworth, D. R. 2008. Economic magic: Creating something from nothing. *Capstone: Exemplary Lessons for High School Economics*. National Council on Economic Education.

Lopus, J. S., Morton, J. S., Reinke, R., Schug, M. C., & Wentworth, D. R. 2008. Why are we a nation of couch potatoes? *Capstone: Exemplary Lessons for High School Economics*. National Council on Economic Education.

Lopus, J. S., & Willis, A. M. 2003. Why People Trade? *Economics in Action: 14 Greatest Hits for Teaching High School Economics*. National Council on Economic Education.

Picault, J. 2019. The economics instructor's toolbox. *International Review of Economics Education*, 30. DOI: [10.1016/j.iree.2019.01.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iree.2019.01.001)

Prince, M. 2004. Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223-231. DOI: [10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00809.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00809.x)

Stevenson, B., & Wolfers, J. 2020. *Principles of economics*. Macmillan International Higher Education.

Wiggins, G. 2016, May 2. *The Point of school isn't to be good at school*. TeachThought. <https://www.teachthought.com/learning/the-point-of-school/> (accessed September 11, 2023).

Wolfers, J. 2019, July 26. Economics isn't dismal. It's useful. *The New York Times*.