

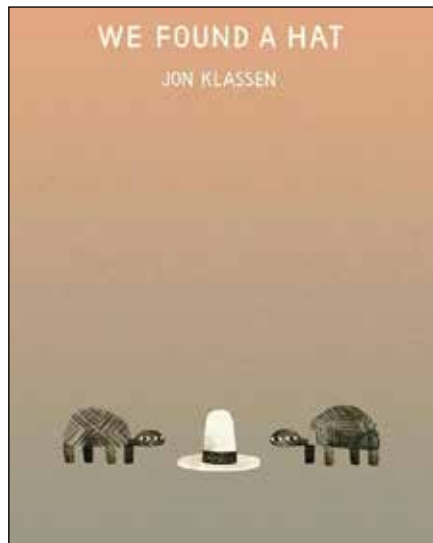
Economic Thinking with Jon Klassen’s Animal Hat Books

Jennifer Lynn Gallagher and Eibhlin Kelly

Economics is a discipline of social studies that helps us understand how to make choices given limited resources—an inquiry vital to personal and societal success in today’s world. Introducing economic thinking at the elementary level can provide students early with knowledge and skills that transcend the classroom, preparing each child to fulfill many different types of “economic citizenship,” including the ability to “make sound personal decisions, to participate in collective action, [and] to struggle against economic inequality.”¹ While there has long been a strong push for including economics in elementary classrooms,² many teachers find it difficult to fit it into their already full curriculum. Research has also found that preservice teacher candidates often lack economic literacy and confidence in their ability to teach economic concepts.³ Teachers whose experiences match this description should not feel alone in their hesitation to teach economics. Instead, by leaning into this discomfort and looking for the opportunities already in the curriculum to highlight an economic concept, teachers might be able to build their own confidence in economics. More importantly, by trying new strategies to “smuggle in” economics, they can provide important economic thinking opportunities for their students.

Purposefully using trade books to support economic thinking is one way to smuggle economics into the elementary classroom. With the right lens, elementary teachers can find economics in trade books they are already reading aloud and using in lessons. Major economic concepts such as scarcity, choices, and tradeoffs, mentioned in the C3 Framework, can be found in many story lines of the books we already love.⁴ By making those connections to economic principles explicit, teachers can provide age-appropriate, meaningful opportunities to engage young students in the important skills of economic thinking.

In this article, we share an idea we created to purposefully integrate economic thinking into elementary curriculum by exploring the economic principles in a popular children’s book series—books that many teachers are already using in classrooms. We also provide examples from Ms. Holloman’s fourth grade classroom in North Carolina—where our “Animal Hats and Economics” unit of study was first piloted.



Jon Klassen’s Hat Series

Jon Klassen’s Hat Series is a multiple award-winning, *New York Times* best-selling trilogy of children’s books. Each story follows a different animal as they embark on various adventures involving one universal element—a hat. Klassen’s works are highly regarded for their elements of dry, deadpan humor. While there is deceptive simplicity in the text, detailed illustrations underscore hidden deeper meanings. His writing style allows readers to draw their own conclusions about each book’s theme and significance.

While economics is not the primary focus of this series, each story can be used to effectively teach important economic concepts in a way that helps elementary students find the fun in economic thinking.

Constructing Ideas of Scarcity, Choice, and Economic Imagination

Explain how scarcity necessitates decision making.
—C3 Framework: D2.Eco.1.K-2.

In the picture book *We Found A Hat*, two turtles happen upon a hat that they both want.⁵ It is a humorous example of the concept of scarcity. There is one hat, but there are two turtles who want the hat. Because of the scarcity of the hat, the turtles must make a choice. They ultimately decide to leave the hat in the desert, yet the illustrations let readers

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know that the turtles are still thinking about that hat as they move on in the desert. In Part three, both turtles imagine a world in which they both have hats.

Snapshot notes is a strategy we created that allows teachers and students to pause during an exploration of a resource (e.g. a book, video, simulation) to purposefully construct deeper understandings of concepts. On a handout (Pullout, P1), students create drawings with captions to show their understanding of concepts as revealed in a book, and then create a second set of drawings and captions to show how the concept is relevant to their own lives. By using snapshot notes during a read-aloud of *We Found A Hat*, teachers can engage students in constructing three economic concepts that are present in the book: scarcity, choice, and economic imagination. As each concept is presented in the story, the teacher can pause to have students specifically and deliberately think about each economic concept by making a “snapshot” drawing of how the concept is present in the book. Then, after they have finished the scene from the book, they can connect each economic concept to an example from their own life through a second snapshot (below the first set, all on the same handout).

During the snapshot notes activity in Ms. Holloman’s class, students all illustrated the economic concepts of scarcity, choice, and economic imagination from the book in similar ways. However, the ways in which they connected the economic concepts to their own lives varied greatly. To show “scarcity,” many students used the example of food, for example a single candy bar shared between themselves and their sibling. But some students identified other resources that were scarce in their lives such as glue sticks in their classroom, the single copy of the popular new book in the library, or the piece of playground equipment that many students want to use (e.g., soccer balls) or have to share in a short time (e.g. swings and slides).

After reading about the choice that the turtles made (which was to leave the hat in the desert), the fourth graders were able to reflect on making choices because of scarcity in their own lives. Again, food was a popular connection. Many students reflected on making the choice to share popcorn or candy. One student reflected on the need to make a choice about what exhibits to see on their recent class field trip to the zoo—understanding that they had a scarce amount of time for their visit. Another reflected on deciding which jacket to buy because of a scarce amount of money.

Perhaps most illustrative of the power of story to enhance elementary students’ economic thinking was the way in which they were able to imagine better worlds. Similar to the turtles imagining a world where they both had hats, students imagined a number of new economic possibilities including more pencil sharpeners for their class, more time to play video games, access

to clean water for all people, and endless electricity. Applying this last concept of “economic imagination”⁶ allowed the students to recognize that economic systems are not static, they rely on thinkers who can begin by imagining better worlds.

Exploring Choices and Costs with *This is Not My Hat*
NCSS C3 Framework: D2.Eco.1.3-5. Compare the benefits and costs of individual choices.

In *This is Not My Hat*, hats are still a scarce good in the world of Jon Klassen’s animals.⁷ And, like in the real world, scarcity requires one to make choices. Thus, a small fish has chosen to steal a hat from a big fish. But, as any economist knows, all choices that are made because of scarcity have both costs and benefits. In this case, the small fish gets to enjoy the hat for a short time, but ultimately the big fish is able to get his hat back from the thief. While Klassen’s illustrations offer humorous implications, it is ultimately up to the reader to imagine what might be the consequence (the cost) of the little fish’s act of thievery.

Through economic story mapping (Pullout, P2), students and the teacher can analyze what was scarce in the story, the choice the little fish made because of scarcity and desire, and analyze the potential costs and benefits of that choice. Ultimately, the students can decide if the choice was “good” or “bad,” wise or short sighted, through economic thinking. During the economic story mapping in Ms. Holloman’s class, most students decided that the little fish made a bad choice because the implied cost (which students imagined might be his being eaten by the bigger fish) was higher than the benefit (wearing the hat for a short time).

After completing the economic story map through a retelling of *This is Not My Hat*, the students can apply the economic thinking story map when reflecting on other books. They can also create their own story using the same story map as an outline, imagining the costs and benefits of a particular choice necessitated by scarcity. These fourth grade students used a wide variety of fiction and non-fiction economic scenarios for their stories. Their storylines ranged from realistic (choosing between pets) to fantasy (a scarcity of light between the stars and the moon). The economic story mapping supported and evaluated students’ abilities to do economic thinking as well as their proficiency with narrative writing.

Innovating Goods to Meet High Demand with *I Want My Hat Back*
NCSS C3 Framework: D2.Eco.7.6-8. Analyze the role of innovation and entrepreneurship in a market economy

In *I Want My Hat Back*, a bear has lost his hat and is desperate to find it.⁸ He searches the forest and asks every forest animal he runs into about his missing hat. The bear mourns that he might not see his hat again. It isn’t until the end of the book

when he realizes that he HAD seen his hat during his search and retreats back through the forest to retrieve it.

By this time in the unit, students will recognize “hats” as a scarce resource in Jon Klassen’s animal world. And whenever supply can’t keep up with demand of a scarce resource, economic theory tells us that technology and innovation are needed. Therefore, after reading the third book, students get a chance to be innovators and entrepreneurs. In order to meet the high demand of hats in Jon Klassen’s books, they will create a newly designed hat for the animals out of recycled goods. In our recycled hat project (Pullout, P3), students design a hat, invent a brand, and explain why their hat is innovative, describing its specific features to help meet the supply and demand in the market of Jon Klassen’s imaginary world.

Ms. Holloman’s fourth graders were especially tuned into to the needs of Klassen’s animal consumers while they designed their recycled hats. One student made holes for animal ears, “one size fits most.” Another used paper clips to securely attach the hat to the body of the animal, in light of the fact that thievery was a common theme among the books. The students enthusiastically shared their designed hats and highlighted how they innovated to meet the demands of the market place, the needs of the animals in the books.

Conclusion

When teachers are able to confidently identify economic concepts in children’s books, they can help their students engage in economic thinking through interactive tasks before, during, and after a read-aloud. The economic concepts we taught in this lesson appear on Pullout, P4. Snapshot notes and economic story mapping can both be used with other books that elementary teachers might already be reading in their classrooms. By integrating economic thinking into lessons in

this way, elementary teachers can ensure their favorite books are not only resources for ELA objectives, but are also supporting C3 Framework-aligned social studies objectives. 🌍

Acknowledgment

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Notes

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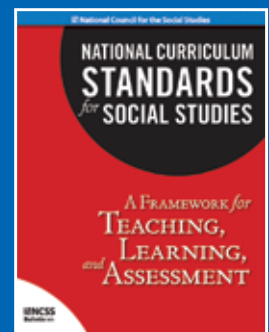
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