

Where Do Ideas Come From?

[Editor's note: Beth Vander Kolk is a veteran first grade teacher. She has presented at many teacher workshops, and served in a wide variety of mentoring/coaching roles. Her energy and creativity have brought Beth awards and accolades from her peers and educational organizations. Here she shares her insights and suggestions on pulling forth those creative ideas that have the power to captivate and enthuse students who will remember these special projects long after other classroom activities begin to fade.]

I love a hands-on approach to Economic Literacy. Because Economics is so pervasive in all aspects of life, it is easy to use it to help the theoretical become practical. By melding economic concepts and the core proficiencies, special projects help students integrate this understanding into their "outside" life in a long-term way. They begin to realize the relevance of their learning and to start the process of ownership of the material.

My experience has taught me that projects bubbling up organically have the most success. So when I begin thinking about a project I ask myself the following types of questions.

- Is there anything in our curriculum that would lend itself to a project? (This keeps me motivated to do the extra work. The students are already working to master a body of knowledge and are primed for the project. Both they and I enjoy approaching the goals of the curriculum from an added perspective. Also, the project can be justified to board members or administration who may not be familiar with the benefits of economic literacy.)
- Does the group of students that I am working with have a particular talent, skill or interest that could be tapped into for a project? This helps to sustain student interest and motivation during the production period.
- Is there any area in my curriculum that could use a bit of extra attention? For example I realized one year that my students were not getting much art instruction. Doing an art auction project prompted me to acquire some additional art tools and materials and encouraged me to do more extensive research on different techniques. The realization of the added art benefits for my students encouraged me to put more energy into the project.
- Are there any school themes, special community celebrations or community events coming up that could tie in with a project? Tapping into the momentum of what is already going on can be very helpful. Often there are volunteers and materials already available if you are part of a larger project. And you don't have to drum up as much interest individually if you use other events that are already on the calendar. For example my class made bookmarks and sold them at the school wide book fair. We tied our advertising in with the parent group in charge and we took advantage of all of the foot traffic coming to the event. We sold out!
- Ask yourself if you have a talent, interest, or skill that you could use to help your students with a project. Are you a crafter, builder, writer, or photographer? Are you musical, dramatic, or artistic? Do you have access to certain tools, places or people?
- Think about whether your students would do better at producing a good or offering a service.

Once I decide on a project and get my students on board, I let them brainstorm the first level of detail and think about their role in crafting the project. This builds ownership and teaches them that their ideas have value. I follow the initial classroom decisions by instigating a dialogue with other people in our school and neighborhood community. I am often surprised at what people offer to do and with whom they offer to connect me. (I have never yet been turned down. Instead I have been offered resources that I never even dreamed of!) I have been overwhelmed by the eagerness of people to support the entrepreneurial efforts of my students. We have been intensively working with Economic Literacy for the past three years, and word has gotten around. People often come to me and ask what we are about and if there is anything they can do to help.

The next thing I try to do is to make the project experience as rich as a real world experience. For example, in our book publishing process, part of the marketing and selling phase involves a book signing gala where the authors are available for autographs and photographs. We invited the local media and have had a professional caterer volunteer to cater our event. (Nothing like a black tie event with first graders I always say.) I try to talk to professionals in the field of the business that we are simulating. I ask them to interface with our students if possible. For example last year we grew flower plants from seeds under grow lights in our room. That spring we took a field trip to a local greenhouse and the owner took us through the different aspects of her business. You should have seen how proud our students were when she demonstrated on a large scale what they were doing on a small scale in our classroom! My class felt more like fellow business owners than students at that point.

Along with the conceptual decision of what the project will be about, there are a number of nuts and bolts decisions you will need to consider.

- How long do you want your project to take? How many in-school hours could you dedicate? How many hours before or after school?
- Who might your potential customers be?
- How will you promote your business?
- How much would the start-up costs of the business be? And where are you going to get those funds? Not all businesses have to be costly or time intensive. Two years ago my class studied three readers' theaters that we performed at a little show. We charged a small admission price but the up-front cost was nothing. In addition, the two weeks that we spent learning our scripts was done during our language arts time and fulfilled the goals of reading fluency, so no class time was lost). I took the students two at a time around the school with a digital camera. I did this during their recess time. Every student took photos of what they thought was visually interesting in our school. I printed them off on the school's black and white printer and matted them on black construction paper. I made a photo display outside our classroom entitled, "A View of Our School." After the play the audience was invited to a punch reception held in front of the photo display. They were encouraged to make a donation for any prints that they wanted. The entire project only cost me a pack of black construction paper but we raised \$126. It only took about two weeks of concentrated effort. I hope this reassures you that every project does not need to be high in resource cost.

Have fun with these projects. The students will make some poor decisions along the way. So will you. Remember that once you and your students recognize a mistake for what it is, you will be able to learn from it. Solving those problems along the way adds greatly to your students' self-confidence and their willingness to try new things in life. By providing opportunities to make intelligent choices, accurately weigh costs and benefits, and carefully examine the consequences (short- and long-term), your students will be well on the way toward sound decision making. Doing so in the relatively protected environment of a school will allow them the practice they need to grow into informed, engaged citizens, and to be contributors to the common good.

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