

Economics: A Christian Worldview. The RPS Trade Game

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS/KEY

Goals

1. To show how tariffs interfere with trade. Students will be trading within their own group and with another group. To trade with the other group, students must play a “best of three” rock-paper-scissors game, to simulate the barriers that tariffs add to free trade among nations. (That’s what “RPS” stands for, but don’t tell students; they’ll enjoy figuring it out themselves.)
2. To show how self-interest leads to helping others (the “invisible hand”). You’ll ask students a very enlightening question about their own goals and the goals of others in the room at the activity’s end.

Time

20-25 minutes

Materials Needed

- 5-6 small items per student (fun things like erasers, pencils, knick-knacks, fun-size candy packs, dollar-store items—anything you think kids would like)

(Note: (a) It’s a good idea to get 10-12 different items, and (b) these items don’t have to be things both guys and girls like; this will increase trading!)

- Brown paper bags, Ziploc bags, or any kind of bags to hold these items.
- “Hello, My Name Is ___” stickers for each student (or small blank stickers)
- Randomly or in a planned way, put 5-6 items into each bag. You can mix and match, or put half of a single item and the rest random, or put in some bags all the same item.

Instructions

1. Print this instruction page (no student handout!).
2. Divide the class in half: Xs and Os. Have students **write “X” or “O” on their ID stickers** (to match whichever group you put each in) and attach the stickers so they’re easily seen by others.
3. Tell students to take out a piece of scrap paper or sheet of paper and write this on it:

STARTED WITH: _____

ENDED UP WITH: _____

4. Hand out the bags to the students, and tell them they’re going to trade in 4 rounds, 4 minutes each.
5. Tell students to **fill in the “STARTED WITH” blank** with what they have now.
6. Tell students: “Your goal is to trade you have items you like better. Trade any way you want.”

DO NOT mention anything about tariffs or Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” yet!

7. **Rounds 1 & 2 (4 minutes each):** Tell students THEY MAY TRADE FREELY ONLY WITHIN THEIR GROUP (“X” or “O”). To trade with the other group, THEY MUST PLAY “ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS,” BEST OUT OF FIVE. Say “GO!” to start. (Set a timer for 4 minutes.)
8. **Rounds 3 & 4 (4 minutes each):** Trade freely within both groups (“X” and “O”); NO “ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS” GAME REQUIRED.
9. Tell students to fill in their paper’s blank that says “ENDED UP WITH.”

Debrief and Reveal

Questions to ask students:

- How did the trading rounds compare?
Students will no doubt say the last two were easier.
- What made the last two easier?
Obviously the lack of having to play “Rock, Paper, Scissors.”
- What do you think that game of Rock, Paper, Scissors represents?
Wait for someone to figure out that it represents a tariff; you can guide them to the answer if they can’t figure it out at first.
- Did the Rock, Paper, Scissors game stop you from trading completely?
No, it just slowed it down and made it more tedious/harder.
- How many of you (raise your hands) made it your mission to purposely try to help others get what they want **before** you tried to improve your own bag of loot or **instead** of trying to improve your bag?
Probably no one will raise a hand!
- How many of you are better off than you were with your original bag of stuff?
Probably most/all students will raise their hands.
- What does this confirm about (a) man’s nature, and (b) a voluntary exchange economy, as opposed to a planned economy?
Man is naturally self-seeking, and for planners to try to undo that won’t work; they might as well accept it and let that characteristic improve things for everybody through free trade.