**Trade – why it’s more than just a “$$$” thing**

Have you ever traded anything? Like, a stick of gum for a pencil eraser? Or your lima beans at school lunch for an extra slice of pizza? (Seriously, who would do that? I mean, I would never trade my lima beans.) Even if you think you’ve never traded for anything, I almost guarantee that you have. If you’ve ever paid for anything, you have conducted a trade – really! You wanted something, so you went to a store and traded someone money in exchange for a video game, or a new pair of jeans, or a cheeseburger.

Any time someone gives something of value to someone else in exchange for another item of value, that counts as a trade. So, for example, you might trade money for clothes. Or, a long time ago, you might have traded a chicken for a shirt. Basically, anytime one good is exchanged for another, we consider that a trade. That kind of trade is very obvious, and it happens all around us every day.

But, we don’t necessarily have to be able to see or touch something in order for it to be traded. If we think about it that way, it really opens up the possibilities of what might be considered a trade, huh? Working or having a job might be a kind of trade – you give your time and skills to someone else in exchange for money.

Think about what I said a few sentences ago. “Any time someone gives something of value to someone else in exchange for another item of value – that counts as a trade.” Another way to put it might be: Any time we get something we want in exchange for giving up something someone else wants. So – are there things that are traded from one person to another that are not necessarily “goods”?

The truth is, throughout history (and even today), people have traded a great deal of things that can’t be seen, or touched, or even counted. The following paragraphs describe some examples of very common types of trade that are just as important, if not more so, than the exchange of any good or product.

**The Exchange of Customs**

I hope you all are not too young to remember a few years ago when a Korean musician named Psy came out with a song called “Gangnam Style”. His music video (mainly because it was hilarious and ridiculous) sparked thousands of copycats and parody videos, not to mention almost every young person (and some old people, too!) could at least partially imitate some of the dance moves from the video. That’s an example of how an action or custom can spread from one place or culture to another.

Now, as fun as “Gangnam Style” was, it obviously faded away fairly quickly, just like “The Harlem Shake” and countless other Internet memes. But, there are a lot of examples of customs that spread from one culture to another throughout history that were a lot longer-lasting and much more important than any Youtube video.

For example, have you ever thought about where the concept of “shaking hands” came from? People shake hands to greet each other, or as a symbol of peace after a disagreement or fight. People all over the world, across many cultures, and for many centuries have practiced this custom – all with virtually the same meaning. Originally, the handshake was practiced between enemies when making peace before or after a battle. The reason they extended their empty hands to each other was to show that they weren’t holding any weapons. It’s not hard to see how that tradition “stuck” and has evolved into such a common use today.

**The Exchange of Knowledge**

Along with culture and physical goods, one of the most important things that has been shared or traded between people throughout history is knowledge. This type of exchange has been extraordinarily valuable. Imagine some prehistoric cave people making small talk before gathering for a business deal (trading sharpened sticks for smooth stones). Here’s what a conversation might have looked like:

Unga Bunga: Sorry about your chief, Ooga Booga. I heard he died last week.

Ooga Booga: Thanks. At least he got to try these new berries we found on that tall hill. I haven’t eaten any yet, but I was thinking of having some for lunch today. Want some? (extends hand)

Unga Bunga: What?! No! Those berries are poisonous. My pet mastodon ate some last week and got really sick! Hey…wait a minute. Do you think that’s what killed your chief?

Ooga Booga: (Drops the berries quickly) Thanks for the tip! I’ll tell everyone else in my tribe. Life is too dangerous to take unnecessary risks!

Unga Bunga: Agreed. Say…is that a saber-toothed tiger over there? Wanna go poke it just for fun before the meeting starts?

Ooga Booga: Oh, *do* I? (they run off happily together)

Now, I don’t know for sure if this exact conversation every really took place, but the exchange of knowledge has always been one of the most important aspects of human interaction – sometimes having a huge impact on the history of the world. The cure for a disease…the best way to build a ship for long-distance travel…the existence of far-off continents few had ever seen before – these ideas and many more spread throughout the world, sparking ever-increasing exchange and interaction. Think about how quickly ideas can spread today because of the Internet – the trading of knowledge continues to change the world.

**The Exchange of Ideas**

There’s one more type of trade we haven’t discussed yet – it’s similar to knowledge, but still probably deserves it’s own category. You see, the exchange of knowledge has a lot to do with sharing the things we know with each other, but sometimes this type of trade led to revolutionary (literally) changes in the way people thought about really important ideas.

For example, in addition to all of the goods being exchanged throughout the world’s global trade network, people often shared their thoughts and feelings about really important topics like spirituality or the meaning of life. In the last unit, you studied some of the world’s major religions. Think about the fact that both Christianity and Islam started in a sparsely populated, tiny sliver of the world many centuries ago. Today, they are the world’s two most popular religions, found in virtually every country in the world, with over half of Earth’s population worshipping according to the beliefs of one or the other. The spread of religious or spiritual ideas has always been a consequence of human interaction.

Other ideas spread (and continue to spread to this day) throughout the planet via trade, such as peoples’ ideas about the best way to govern a country. You already know that thousands of years ago, the Greeks had this crazy idea that citizens should have a “say” in their government through voting. That idea, in turn, has been studied throughout the world ever since. The third president of the United States (and author of the Declaration of Independence) was inspired by the ideas of a bunch of Europeans that had been dead for hundreds of years. Their writing (and his) continue to inspire and challenge the way people think about government throughout the world today through the exchange of ideas as people of all cultures increasingly interact with each other.

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