Charities, Fitness, and Education:  
Exploring Charitable Giving in Adolescents through a Fitness-Driven Virtual Economy

By 
Douglas Beick

A THESIS

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Title: CHARITIES, FITNESS, AND EDUCATION:
EXPLORING CHARITABLE GIVING IN
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DRIVEN VIRTUAL ECONOMY

Approved: 

Professor Stephen Fickas

This thesis is an exploration of methods to encourage physical activity and
philanthropy among adolescents. Dr. Stephen Fickas has developed a virtual economy
in which adolescents use personal fitness trackers to record activity; the adolescents are
rewarded with virtual coins that they may redeem for rewards and privileges. I have
envisioned and outlined an extension of this economy that incorporates charitable
giving. Virtual charities will provide opportunities to disadvantaged adolescents within
the economy, and the charities will rely on donations from the adolescents. A curriculum
I have developed provides foundational knowledge and informational activities for the
adolescents. This thesis discusses these concepts and possible outcomes of their
implementation.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Fickas for allowing me to work with him on such a relevant and worthwhile project, Professor Mossberg for her unwavering support and verve, and Mr. Prideaux for his kind advice and positive involvement. I am grateful to Pam Simon, Sydney Ashland, and Robin Nelson for their professional feedback and support, and for allowing me to engage them and their input in this project. I owe everything else to my family and friends, for supporting me through the hours of work throughout my school career.
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I. Introduction

The concepts of education and fitness have always engaged my curiosity. As the son of two teacher-coaches, I have grown up in a climate that has encouraged me to investigate health, fitness, schooling, intelligence, and more. Education and fitness, in conjunction with philanthropy, to me represent the values of good health in the mental, physical, and socio-spiritual spheres of life. In this thesis, I explore education, fitness, and philanthropy as they relate to adolescents. Specifically, I have worked with my advisor, Dr. Stephen Fickas of the University of Oregon, to develop a system that will allow adolescents to combine physical activity with philanthropy, and I have additionally outlined a curriculum that is designed to teach late-elementary and middle school-aged adolescents about philanthropy. This project works in conjunction with an ongoing program on adolescent physical activity that Dr. Fickas and his team have developed. The system I have created here is ready to be adapted into Dr. Fickas’ program, which will hopefully offer accessible data and ideas on how to promote physical activity and philanthropy among adolescents.
II. Background

Physical activity is crucial to adolescents’ development and maturation, and while current levels of activity among adolescents are alarmingly low, there are exciting efforts underway to change this. Research has shown a significant decline in physical activity among adolescents over the last couple of decades (Dwyer). This is concerning, because a lack of activity can lead to a multitude of health issues in both the short and long terms; meanwhile, proper levels of activity not only alleviate these issues but actually offer health benefits (“The AHA’s Recommendations”). It is clear that promoting a physically active lifestyle among adolescents should be of paramount concern for all adults. Many prominent efforts to encourage adolescent activity have come about in recent years, such as the PLAY 60 campaign jointly led by the American Heart Association and the Nation Football League (“NFL PLAY 60 Challenge”). Other groups are researching the most effective forms of activity for promoting good adolescent health. A 2013 study found that one hour of play per day using an “exergame” – a “videogame that required gross motor activity” – led to significant weight loss among overweight youth (Staiano). The success of such efforts could mean the easing and possible reversal of recent trends of poor health among adolescents.

With a clear need for improvements to youth health initiatives, as well my own interest in good physical activity, Dr. Fickas’ program for encouraging physical activity spoke to me on a deep level. When I first met with Dr. Fickas in early 2014, he and his team were in the beginning stages of rolling out a new project that used Fitbit devices to encourage physical activity among adolescents. A Fitbit is a small, battery-powered
health-monitoring device from Fitbit Inc. that tracks the physical activity of the wearer (Fitbit Inc.). Dr. Fickas and his team were working with a Eugene-based after school program called Fidgets2Widgets to develop a virtual store that offered rewards and privileges to adolescents in response to physical activity that had been tracked by the Fitbits. The original impetus for the project was a growing concern at Fidgets2Widgets that the students there were not getting enough physical activity. Sydney Ashland and Pam Simon, the after school program’s co-founders, enlisted Dr. Fickas’ help in creating a way for their students to become more active. This partnership led to the Fitbit project, a project that is currently flourishing. It has become a major cog in the operation of Fidgets2Widgets, and has been adopted by the Boys and Girls Club of Emerald Valley, with a third project site developing at Edison Elementary School in Eugene.

Fidgets2Widgets brands itself in-part as “High tech,” and the ultimate high-tech solution was to create a virtual economy in which the students would earn “coins” from being active while wearing a Fitbit, and then the students could redeem these coins at a virtual store offering privileges – such as getting first in line for a snack – and prizes – such as real-world toys or in-game resources for the video game Minecraft, an extremely popular game that many of the students play at Fidgets2Widgets. This entire economic infrastructure was designed and is run by Dr. Fickas’ team, so they exercise complete control over the content and appearance of the store. The store is set up to have students individually login to a personal account, and from there, they can view all of the items available for purchase. It is a simple experience for the students, offering readily accessible prices and descriptions of the goods, with click-to-purchase controls.
I joined this project while it was well underway, and I have now outlined a system to incorporate philanthropy in the form of virtual charities. My original goal had been to increase the economic complexity in order to engage critical thinking on the students’ part. Through many discussions with Dr. Fickas and Pam Simon of Fidgets2Widgets, I decided I could achieve an increased economic complexity by designing charities that would work within the virtual economy. These charities would provide a means for students to be philanthropically and physically active as well as to seek aid in the virtual economy. In order to effectively incorporate the charities into the adolescents’ experiences, I have also designed a curriculum for the adolescents that will introduce charitable concepts and foster a conversation on philanthropy. Though designed with Fidgets2Widgets in mind, all aspects of this charity project are intended to be adaptable to additional sites within the larger Fitbit program.

Many of the primary aspects of charities have to do with personal income, taxes, and general financial matters (Internal Revenue Service). While these fiscal features are incredibly important to the workings of a charity, they are secondary to the philanthropic goals of a charity. For this reason, the way in which we handle charities is dramatically simplified. We remove any aspects of taxation or finance, and we instead focus the charities on the concepts of philanthropy and charitable giving. This in turn makes our curriculum more accessible and interesting to the kids. The primary features of charities that we will reference are their charitable causes and their general need for donations and other support. These two concepts will be important as I develop the curriculum on charities.

Students are ready to be philanthropically active. In a highly regarded study by
the United Nations Foundation and the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, the researchers showed that nearly 9 in 10 adolescents donate to charity when given the opportunity (Kalugyer 3). Adolescents relish the opportunity to be charitable, and I’m excited to see how they express that through the Fitbit virtual economy.

The power of adolescents as a philanthropic force not only can be a societal boon but also can work for the benefit of their own wellbeing. Considering that adolescents are so willing to be involved in philanthropy, my hope is that this project can harness that desire and use it to encourage physical activity. If the students are given the opportunity to make more donations by earning more coins through physical activity, I believe they will take that opportunity.
III. Charities in the Virtual Store

We wanted to add charities to the virtual store for two reasons: to provide an involved means in which the students could work with charities and to create a more economically diverse store. A full analysis of how this addition will affect the Fitbit economy is beyond the scope of this project. However, ensuring that the charities will provide enough of an economic incentive for the students to choose to fund them is crucial. Throughout this discussion of the virtual charities, specific monetary values will not be stated, because the size of the Fitbit economy will vary from site to site.

There will be two charities; one charity will focus on aiding students within the virtual economy and the other will give a real-world result to the students’ virtual donations. Each charity shall have an initial endowment of virtual coins but will rely on student donations for all funding beyond this endowment.

The charity within the virtual economy – I call this charity “Home Help” – provides aid to students in the form of virtual coins or virtual resources to be used in Minecraft. Students will need to explain their disadvantage in earning coins in order to earn the consideration of Home Help. The real-world-oriented charity, which I call “Virtual2Real,” will fund a different cause depending on the site of the specific Fitbit economy. Since my project focuses on Fidgets2Widgets, I aimed to develop a charity that is relevant to the students there. As of this writing, the tentative plan is for Virtual2Real to be funded by a donor who will provide scholarships for financially disadvantaged Fidgets2Widgets students. Talks between the donor and the directors of Fidgets2Widgets are ongoing, but I am hopeful that Virtual2Real can proceed as
Students will be able to interact with these charities through an additional interface in the virtual store, and the staff, serving as store administrators, will have a similar addition to their end of the store. The general intention is to provide three capabilities: working with donations, working with applications, and working with information about the charities themselves. Specifics of these interfaces’ layout are described in the following section. For all students, having the charities tied into the store will allow the students to donate or apply to charities directly from their store account, which simplifies the process of handling the students’ information, because the processes of donating and receiving coins will function the same as current in-store transactions.

As stated above, the interface for both students and administrators to work with charities will be through additions to the current store interface. In designing the store interface, my primary objective was to incorporate all necessary aspects in an intuitive and attractive way. My strategy for achieving this was to use minimal text and a simple aesthetic. The user navigates the store by means of a few simple menus that allow for easy changes in the information being displayed. Navigating the store is then similar to navigating a tree-shaped network.

The following sections describe the individual features of each page within the store, first concerning the student viewpoint and then concerning the staff/administrative viewpoint.
**Adolescent view**

As seen in figure 1, the student is prompted with three options: *work with donations*, *work with charity applications*, and *read about charities*. Once the student has made a selection, he or she is brought to a display area, which provides the appropriate information and allows the student to return to the main menu.

![Student View Diagram](image)

*Figure 1. Student Main Menu*

**Donations:**

The student has two options with donations: to make a donation and to view their personal donation history (see fig. 2). By choosing “Donate Now,” the student is taken to a new display (fig. 3) where he or she is prompted first to choose a charity, and then is prompted to give his or her name, donation amount, and statement about his or her motivation for donating. The goal for these fields is to give a personal sense to the
student’s donation. By creating a connection between the student and the donation, the goal is to create a psychological attachment on the part of the student.

Figure 2. Student Donation Menu

Figure 3. Student Direct Donation
Choosing “View Donation History” on the menu in figure 2, the student is taken to a page displaying information about each of his or her past donations (fig. 4). Here, the student chooses among his or her past donations to view the donation amount and motivation he or she provided for this donation. This allows the student to feel the permanence of his or her donation, as well as to track donations.

![Figure 4. Student Donation History](image)

**Applications:**

The student again has two options: submitting an application and viewing his or her application history (fig. 5). The organization here is similar to that of the donation options. Choosing to apply to a charity brings a student to a page (fig. 6) where a student submits his or her name, the grant he or she is seeking, and his or her reason for wanting this grant. Again, the goal is to create a personal connection between the student’s request and the student.
Choosing “View Past Applications” in figure 5 brings the student to a window displaying the information the student provided, as well as the status of the application.
and any information on this status if that information is available (fig. 7). The process of applying to a charity involved the creation of an argument; the student had to provide a quality reason for why he or she needed the grant and the purpose it would serve. The response to this application, as viewed in the application history page, provides critical feedback to the student’s argument. In this way, the process of applying for a grant teaches the students to create sound logic in addition to expressing needs they might have.

![Application Status](image)

**Figure 7. Student Application History**

**Charity Information:**

Figure 8 shows the page on charity information. Here, the student picks a charity and then may view three pieces of information regarding the charity. The “Purpose” for the charity tells the students of the needs that the charity hopes to fulfill. The “Goals for Giving” describes what the charity is looking for from applicants. The “Current Funding” of the charity simply displays the value of the coins in that charity’s funding.
Figure 8. Student View Charity
**Administrator view**

The charity administrator first selects the charity with which he or she would like to work (fig. 9). From here, the administrator, or admin, may choose an action (fig. 10). The first action option is to view and update charity information (fig. 11). The second option is to view a history of all donations made to the charity (fig. 12). Here, the admin may choose to view donations one at a time, selected via the menu top right, or in a spreadsheet via the table button at bottom right. The third option is to view applications submitted to the charity (fig. 13). Here, the admin selects an application by the drop down menu in the top right. Each application displays a student’s name, grant request, and the reason he or she is making the request.

![Admin View](image.png)

Figure 9. Administrator Main Menu
Figure 10. Admin Work with Charity Menu

Figure 11. Admin Charity Information
Figure 12. Admin Work with Donations

Figure 13. Admin Work with Applications
Further development

There are a few other supports I will bring in to improve the accessibility and function of the charity additions. First, I would like to incorporate a “ping” alert for the store administrators, so that they can be immediately notified when a charity receives a donation or an application. This will allow the charities to function efficiently and create an easier job for the administrators. Second, I would like for the site of the economy to make a “week in review” bulletin available to all students. Such a review could be as simple as a summary of grants given and donations received by the charity, and this list would be posted on a bulletin board for the students to see. Having this review would create a feeling of transparency for the charities, because the students would know how the charity is using its donations. This would also continue to help the students feel involved with the charities, since they would see their donations go to use. Finally, an idea that I am proposing for consideration is the usage of an in-game reward in Minecraft that acknowledges students who have made a particularly large donation. Again, this would encourage a feeling of student involvement with the charities. Each of these features would support well-functioning charities within the virtual economy.

It will be interesting to see, as the charities gain traction in the store, how frequently and how generously students will donate to the two charities. As stated, the charities will rely on the aid of students, and while the hope is for the students to fund both charities fully, it is entirely possible that one or both charities will not appeal to the student and therefore not earn donations.
IV. Developing a Curriculum on Charities

Simply developing the charities, while powerful, does not completely engage the adolescents to work with and understand philanthropy; actively engaging the students in a dialogue about charities can influence students to be even more charitable. A 2013 collaborative study by the United Nations Foundation and the Women’s Philanthropy Institute at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy found that active discussions between parents and their children about charitable giving significantly increased the likelihood that children would donate to charity (Women’s Philanthropy Institute). The most critical aspect of these conversations was the way in which parents described the benefits of charitable giving. Debra Mesch of the Women’s Philanthropy Institute said, “Describing for children how their charity can change someone’s life – rather than just general platitudes – seems to be what really needs to happen” (Kalugyer 3). Dr. Mesch further explained that it is much more effective for a parent to describe a particular scenario in which someone may benefit from charitable giving, rather than simply saying something like, “Donating to charity is the right thing to do.” It is clear that working directly on charities with students may provide far stronger results than allowing the store additions to be the only charitable influence.

When considering how best to have a dialogue about charities with students, my attention immediately turned to Fidgets2Widgets. Pam Simon and I had previously discussed how the program would hold daily educational sessions designed to foster and enrich the students’ understanding of a multitude of topics. Pam agreed to allow me to create my own session on charities and charitable giving and then to administer this session at Fidgets2Widgets on one afternoon.
Since my plan was to teach at Fidgets2Widgets, I planned my curriculum to follow the same format as their typical educational sessions. These sessions are 30-45 minutes and are comprised of four parts: explanation, example, exercise, and evaluation. The “explanation” portion introduces the concept to the students in a clear and accessible way. “Example” provides concrete, real-world examples of the concept. “Exercise” gives the students the opportunity to work with the concept, often in an interactive activity or game. “Evaluation” involves the Fidgets2Widgets staff surveying or testing the students to see how well and in what ways they have grasped the concept.

In the following section, I elaborate on the content of each of these concepts as they apply to my curriculum.

**Content of Charity Curriculum**

My explanation of charities will make use of a video published by PBS, titled “Adventures in Learning – Teaching Kids about Charity.” A link to this video is in the bibliography. The short video focuses on a mother and her two children as they sell hot chocolate in order to raise money for an unspecified charity. The video is fun and designed to be accessible to kids and parents alike. Moreover, its simple focus on how to raise money for charity makes it easy to comprehend for the students. I used the video’s concluding discussion on why the kids enjoyed raising money to segue into a short discussion on causes that the students would find worthy of earning donations.

This discussion on worthy causes then led to the “example” section, wherein I discussed nationally relevant examples such as the Salvation Army, Goodwill, United Way, the Red Cross, and the YMCA. Each of these are well known charities that are among the largest charities in terms of revenue from donations (“The 50 Largest U.S.
Charities”). I asked the students what they knew about each of these charities and briefly discussed each charity’s goals. We also talked about ways in which charities can receive funding, which then brought us to the “exercise” portion of the session.

My exercise for the students was a game of my own design. A copy of a game sheet is in Appendix A. The goal for the game was to teach the students about making decisions among multiple worthwhile choices and to show the students how there are many worthy charities that go underfunded. The game worked as follows: students were divided into three groups of roughly five students each. There were three 3-5 minute periods that represented one year in game play. The object was for each group to figure out how it wanted to donate a sum of money – $10,000 – among three worthwhile charities. The charities were a pro-health research fund, an environmental protection project, and a food shelter. The caveat was that each charity required $15,000 per “year,” so it was impossible for the students to fully fund all charities. Additional rules were that any extra or lack of funding for a charity were applied to the following “year,” and that students had the option to split their $10,000 donation evenly into two separate $5,000 donations. My intention was that the students would see how a single source of funding can only go so far and that charities need backing from many donors. We discussed this point immediately following the game.

Our discussion of funding for charities offered a few significant points of insight. First, the groups described a desire to try to provide equal funding to multiple causes, rather than provide significant funding to a single cause. One group stated that they intentionally split their money to two charities per year, and they funded each charity twice in the three-year period, which showed the group was focused on equal
funding in both the short and long term. Another group preferred to announce its
donations last, so that they could ensure that any charity that received less funding from
the other two groups would not go forgotten. In both situations, the adolescents chose to
provide widespread support. Another significant point of insight was that the students
were mindful of environmental issues. A couple of students pointed out that
environmental damage may have an impact lasting for decades or longer, and for this
reason, they felt the environmental charity deserved extra consideration. This line of
thinking showed an awareness of the future that I had not expected, so it particularly
captured my attention. Finally, the students showed a ready willingness to work past the
restrictions of the game. When we discussed the fact that none of the charities received
the full $15,000 each year, the students turned the discussion into a brainstorming
session of other ways they could help these charities. Their ideas included donating
blood to help the health cause, riding bikes and picking up litter to help the
environment, and donating canned foods to the food shelter. This ability to think outside
the proverbial box impressed me and truly demonstrated the adolescents’ interest in
serving. Each of these aspects of our discussion demonstrated to me that the adolescents
were not only thinking critically about charities, but that they were also fully engaged in
the topic and able to offer positive solutions to the issues that real-world charities may
face.

Once we finished discussing the game, I introduced the concept of the virtual
charities to the students. I provided a simple explanation similar to my discussion in this
paper. The students were excited to hear about the charities, particularly Virtual2Real.
Their interest convinced me that the charities have a strong chance for success, and I
eagerly await the preliminary results of the implementation of the charities.

Finally, I evaluated the students’ response to my curriculum using a survey created by Pam Simon. They were given the following statements and asked to confirm whether they felt the statements applied to them: “I learned more about charity today than I knew before today,” “Doug was organized and knew what he was talking about,” “I got some good ideas of how I can be generous with others,” “Doug explained what charity is and gave good examples,” and “I enjoyed the activity where we decided how much money goes to different charities.” The students gave their confirmation to each statement.

After having implemented this curriculum once, I feel that it was both clear and succinct enough to be effective. The students at Fidgets2Widgets were very responsive to the topics, asking many questions and openly relating the concepts to their own lives. I was excited to see their engagement. I feel that this curriculum can be successful wherever it is implemented, and I am confident that it can provide a lasting lesson on the importance of being involved with charitable causes.
V. Conclusion and Extensions

Project Success:

I would judge the success of this project in two ways: whether the students make significant donations as the charities grow over the course of time and whether the physical activity of the students increases as they use the charities more. Donations exceeding ten percent of coins spent in the store within a month of the charities launching would constitute significant donations. Following this benchmark, continued success after six to nine months would require donations to reach between fifteen and twenty percent of coins exchanged. I choose these levels, because I do not expect the students to contribute too many of their coins at first, but I would like to see at least a modest investment. Successful gains in physical activity would be any consistent increase in activity. This would be apparent by a consistent increase in the coins being earned by students; since activity yields coins, more coins can only be earned by more activity. Both of these metrics will be easy to track by monitoring the students’ coin levels and how the students spend those coins, and it will thus be possible to determine the success of this project.

Extensions:

The fact that Dr. Fickas’ original Fitbit project took off so quickly tells me that there is a lot of potential in the virtual economy in terms of its ability to encourage physical activity. I sincerely believe that the students who are already being more physically active will relish the opportunity to engage in philanthropy, because it provides another outlet for the students to engage with each other with positive results, and we will ultimately be able to encourage both philanthropy and physical activity.
The curriculum I designed can begin to influence the students to think critically about charities and hopefully the interactive game can create positive peer influence regarding charities.

Once this project has been carried out, I see multiple ways in which the larger Fitbit system can be further applied. I have already discussed how new sites for Dr. Fickas’ project have quickly popped up, and I expect more sites to develop in the next twelve months. As new groups engage with the Fitbit, I think a critical analysis could be undertaken to see how individual traits such as age, gender, and socio-economic status play into the different aspects of the economy.

There are more avenues to explore than trends across different human characteristics; I also see the potential for new technologies and further economic complexities to be added. One technology which I had explored in the earlier stages of my involvement with the project was the Kinect from Microsoft. The Kinect is a motion tracking device that was originally designed to work with the Xbox videogame consoles, but many developers have explored using Kinect technology for other purposes. The Kinect can offer interactive physical activity, wherein the students can play active video games, and this social dynamic could have dramatic effects on activity levels. Analyzing the Kinect’s effect on the virtual economy, both from incorporating new physical activities and from creating a social dynamic to the activity, could offer new insight into the interaction of the economy with the specific activities of the students.

Possible economic additions include the auctioning of goods (as opposed to direct sales) and creating investment opportunities, as well as the creation of more
charities. Advertised auctions would allow us to explore concepts like relative value and the process of saving coins to make a purchase. Investment opportunities could involve tying virtual stocks to the stock value of a few well-known American companies, such as Apple and Google, or allowing a real estate market to develop within Minecraft. This could be tied in to a curriculum on finance, similar to my charity curriculum, and provide an opportunity for the adolescents to develop more complex financial understandings at this young age.

Finally, Dr. Fickas has brought to my attention that a Eugene-based company has been developing a fitness-incentivizing program similar to the Fitbit project, and this company wishes to begin working with his team to develop this project. If this potential extension were tied into the projects at Fidgets2Widgets and the other locations, it would be possible for the employees to choose to be sponsors for the adolescents, and this would allow for an exploration of adult generosity and philanthropy in connection to fitness.

Each of these potential additions could offer fascinating insight into the psychologies of fitness and philanthropy. With further resources and time, I would likely choose to explore the adult-involved extension first, since this ties in the concepts of philanthropy and fitness that are already in place, while also offering the potential benefit of actual support from the adults to the adolescents. However, all of the different extensions would be fascinating to explore.

Students are ready to be philanthropic, and research has shown that they become more philanthropic through engaged conversations and positive modeling. We can use these philanthropic interests to incentivize physical activity and potentially see large
increases in the activity of adolescents. The project I have designed in this thesis is ready to be put into place and developed into a full working examination of fitness, philanthropy, and education.
APPENDIX A: Curriculum Documents

GAME – Three Charities Need Donations

You and your teammates are working together to donate $10,000 to charity. There are three charities you can donate to:

1. Healthy Kids Fund: A charity that works with hospitals to find cures to diseases that affect many kids.
2. Green Environment Project: A charity that protects forests and fights pollution in Oregon.
3. Nutrition for Lane County: A charity that provides food for families who can’t afford to get the food they need.

Each charity needs $15,000 every year. You can donate $10,000 to one charity, or $5,000 to two charities. Work with your teammates to decide how you want to support these charities over the next three years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Healthy Kids Fund</th>
<th>Green Env. Project</th>
<th>Nutrition for Lane County</th>
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<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
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<td>Year 3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Were you able to help all three charities? Why or why not?
Evaluation of Doug:

1. I learned more about charity today than I knew before today.
   YES  NO

2. Doug was organized and knew what he was talking about.
   YES  NO

3. I got some good ideas of how I can be generous with others.
   YES  NO

4. Doug explained what charity is and gave good examples.
   YES  NO

5. I enjoyed the activity where we decided how much money goes to different charities.
   YES  NO
APPENDIX B: Large-view Store Mock-Ups

Student View

Charity Menu

Donation Menu

Application Menu

Charity Information

Figure 1. Student Main Menu
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Figure 11. Admin Charity Information
Figure 12. Admin Work with Donations

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Figure 13. Admin Work with Applications
**Bibliography**


