

NCSS notable trade book lesson plan: *Gifts from the Garbage Truck*

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Gifts from the Garbage Truck: A true story about the things we (don't) throw away

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Book Recommended for kindergarten to 5th grade

Lesson recommended for grades 2-5

This lesson is designed to last at least one week

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Waste has always been a problem for any society or civilization. However, what to do with our waste, given limited resources, is a persistent problem that is not likely to abate anytime soon. From a futures standpoint, managing waste or trash will be a constant source of employment and innovation and is currently a multi-billion-dollar industry. Although many studies examine youths' understanding of littering and litter subversion (e.g. [De Veer et al., 2022](#); [Hartley et al., 2015](#)) as well as youths' consumerism (e.g. [Deutsch and Theodorou, 2010](#)), "little work explores their consumption beyond acquisition, including the mundane practices of sorting out and getting rid, where waste is most likely to emerge" ([Collins, 2020](#), p. 294).

Gifts from the Garbage Truck: A true story about the things we (don't) throw away is the story of Nelson Molina, a New York City sanitation worker and collector whose curated collection of refurbished items he found and repaired during his 34-year career is displayed at the Sanitation Garage in East Harlem, New York (see the Sanitation Foundation in the resources section of this lesson plan).

Nelson Molina's story is compelling for young social studies scholars. As a sanitation worker, Molina is an example of a community helper, which is a topic often found in early grades' social studies curriculum. Moreover, Molina and his story offer young students windows and mirrors and promote empathy ([Bishop, 1990](#)). Molina's story shows the vital work sanitation workers do, which can de-stigmatize waste management work. Molina's story shows a Puerto Rican family that lives in a densely populated neighborhood – a situation students may or may not be familiar with. Depending on the situation, students may see their neighborhood reflected in Molina's or else come to see the vibrancy and humanity in a neighborhood they may know little about from personal experience.

In this lesson, students take on the roles of "garbologists," as they investigate the waste and waste management in their communities and use artistic, curative, activist and inquiry strategies to raise awareness about it. Students will conclude by creating a Sanitation Soiree where they will create and curate trash collages. Trash collages are an example of activism ([Smith, 2008](#)), and this activism is a mechanism to engage students in their communities. Care for communities is for all people, including children, and care for communities should extend beyond "green" initiatives ([Hart, 2013](#)). Involving children in the design and implementation of environmental initiatives is a key way to engage them in their community and build an ethos of care ([Hart, 2013](#); [Basche et al., 2016](#)). Moreover, this lesson, and the ensuing projects, should stress the permanence and persistence of waste. As [Cinquetti and de Carvalho \(2007\)](#) have noted, children may have the misconception that landfills and acts of recycling can eliminate garbage and that teachers' lack of challenge to this misconception may thus lead to



further silences about the need to reduce consumption. In short, students may erroneously conclude that small, individual acts like picking up litter and recycling are enough, rather than eliminating the need for these actions in the first place (Bellino and Adams, 2017). As such, place-based and locally concerned practices are important for helping students understand the relationship between waste, consumption and the environment (Silo, 2011; Widat *et al.*, 2025).

Book summary

The 40-page picture book begins with a foreword by Molina himself. Through the salutation “Dear Reader,” Molina describes his childhood in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood in East Harlem (El Barrio). The main body of the story begins similarly, with Molina’s childhood collecting. An illustration shows Molina on a New York City street holding and looking affectionately at what scrap lumber he picked up from the street. On the next page, we learn that Nelson’s mother taught him to make a birdhouse from the found lumber. In the subsequent scenes, readers see Nelson adopt the habits that he would carry into adulthood; he is shown collecting and organizing stamps from his father, a merchant marine and cleaning and repairing a toy he found in a trash can. About halfway through the story, readers are introduced to Nelson’s job as a sanitation worker. Illustrations show Nelson dutifully collecting trash in his East Harlem neighborhood through a variety of challenging conditions including deep snow and pouring rain. The narrative then turns from collecting trash to the life cycle of trash. Readers are told some trash was burned for electricity, some was recycled and some was buried underground. Readers then see Nelson stop to uncover an interesting item from the garbage he’s tasked with collecting, which he takes back to the sanitation garage to organize and display. Nelson encountered pushback for his collection, but ultimately it was allowed to stay.

The book ends with Molina’s “extraordinary collection” and that “people from all around the world come to see” (Larsen, 2024, p. 30). The story mirrors the message of Molina’s museum, “It’s an invitation to think differently about the things we throw away” (p. 31). The back matter contains tangible actions youth can take, defines the concept of “upcycling” and shows photographs of Molina with his treasures. This book is an important window and mirror (Bishop, 1990) that can build empathy and understanding in young students.

NCSS themes

- Theme 5: Individuals, groups and institutions,
- Theme 7: Production, distribution and consumption
- Theme 8: Science, technology and society
- Theme 10: Civic ideals and practices

C3 framework

The book and lessons are focused on C3 Civics Economics and Geography benchmarks for grades 2–5 as well as evaluating sources and using evidence.

Civics

D2.Civ.13.3–5: Explain how policies are developed to address public problems.

Economics

- D2.Eco.1.3–5:* Compare the benefits and costs of individual choices.
- D2.Eco.8.3–5:* Identify examples of external benefits and costs.
- D2.Eco.12.3–5:* Explain the ways in which the government pays for the goods and services it provides.

Geography

D2.Geo.4.3–5: Explain how culture influences the way people modify and adapt to their environments.

Evaluating sources and using evidence

D3.3.3–5: Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources in response to compelling questions.

D3.4.3–5: Use evidence to develop claims in response to compelling questions.

D4.1.3–5: Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.

D4.3.3–5: Present a summary of arguments and explanations to others outside the classroom using print and oral technologies (e.g. posters, essays, letters, debates, speeches and reports) and digital technologies (e.g., Internet, social media and digital documentary).

D4.7.3–5: Explain different strategies and approaches students and others could take in working alone and together to address local, regional and global problems and predict possible results of their actions.

Materials

Garbology Logs (nature journal or composition book) for each student.

One five-pound weight (kettlebell, dumbbell and medicine ball).

Clean trash/waste/recycling from the classroom.

Plastic or rubber gloves.

Collectibles.

One copy of *Gifts of the Garbage Truck*.

Envelopes or Ziploc bag (1 per student).

One piece of recycled cardboard or one cereal box per student (for trash collage).

Spray glue.

Big ideas

- (1) Waste management is a problem all communities face;
- (2) Art can be a powerful way to raise awareness about issues we care about and
- (3) Value is a social construct and vary among people and places.

Objectives

- (1) Students will evaluate the effectiveness of Molina's collection in raising awareness about waste in his city;
- (2) Students will document and analyze garbage in their homes, communities and classrooms and begin to formulate a plan for managing it;
- (3) Students will interview a sanitation worker in-person or virtually to understand waste management and sanitation work in their cities and communities and
- (4) Students will plan a sanitation soiree for their local community.

Vocabulary

Sanitation

Sanitation worker

Collect

Collection

Waste

Waste management

Lesson procedures

Exploration

Estimated time to complete: One 45-min session

Objective: Students will evaluate the effectiveness of Molina's collection in raising awareness about waste in his city.

Assessment method: Writing prompt

Procedure

The first step is to build anticipation and introduce students to concepts and ideas students will encounter in the book and the lesson.

- (1) Distribute notebooks. Explain that scientists keep notebooks to record their observations and findings. Explain that for this week, students will be scientists studying a problem in the community or city. Explain that *garbology* is the study of household waste. Share that the first garbologist was William Rathje, an archaeology professor who studied household waste in Tucson, Arizona, in 1973. Explain that students are going to act as garbologists. They will be studying waste and will record their thoughts and findings in their notebooks just like archaeologists and other scientists. Explain that students will learn more from Dr Rathje later but that garbologists are able to learn about people's consumption patterns based on their trash. What Rathje found by studying trash was that many families were throwing away beef at a time when there was a shortage of beef in the United States. Rathje found that some families bought beef in bulk due to the shortage but then wasted more of it than they would have otherwise, which made the beef shortage worse. The least wasteful population included immigrant families from Mexico, who threw away the least and found other uses for the beef when it could no longer be eaten ([Show Me Your Trash, 2021](#)).
- (2) Show students a collection. Teachers might bring in a collection from their home or show students examples from art museums or the local school or community. A school's trophy case or yearbook collection can be a good starting point. Ask students to draw and then describe the items they see in their notebooks. Explain that those items are called a collection. Ask students why people collect things. Students can share their own experiences with collecting.
- (3) Next, show students clean items from the garbage can or recycling bin. Students should sketch what they see in their notebooks. Ask if these items from the garbage can be a collection based on the characteristics they just described. Finally, ask students if trash can be treasure or something people can use or value. Students should jot down their responses in their notebooks.
- (4) Prepare to read *Gifts from the Garbage Truck*. Show students the book's cover. Before reading, explain that students will learn about a man named Nelson Molina, a sanitation worker in New York City. Explain that a city's sanitation department takes care of the garbage in a town. Show images that will resonate with students (e.g. images of your city's trash pickup) and have students locate New York City on a map. Have students make predictions about the story based on the cover and what they have experienced so far.

- (5) Assessment: Share notes with a partner. In their responses, students should
 - a. Reflect on what they learned about collections, the things they found in the class garbage or recycling bin.
 - b. Predictions for the book.
- (6) Distribute Ziploc bags and gloves. Explain to students that they will be doing an art project, like Molina, to help raise awareness about waste in their community. Tell students they should be on the lookout for litter through the week. Put the litter in the bag and save it for the Sanitation Soiree when they will create a trash collage.

Development

Estimated time to complete: Two 45 min sessions. Do activities 1–4 in one class period and 5–8 in the next.

Objective: Students will document and analyze garbage in their homes, communities and classrooms and begin to formulate a plan for managing it.

Assessment: Reflection on the origin and management of trash. Formulate questions for waste management professionals.

Procedure

- (1) Display the clean collection of waste and recyclables from the previous day's lesson. Ask students to describe the kinds of items they see in the collection.
- (2) Read aloud *Gifts from the Garbage Truck*. Chunk the text into manageable parts.
- (3) After reading, return to page 2. Read the following quote from Molina to young readers: "As you grow up, start to look for the value in everything! Before you say it's worthless, try to give it a new life. And remember, there is beauty in the world around you, and it's worth sharing" (Larsen, 2024, p. 2). Ask students how Molina helped people see the beauty in things that were thrown away. Then, ask students to name something they think is beautiful that other people might not see that way. Explain that *value* refers to how much worth or meaning we believe something has. We might value things we see as beautiful or deserving. Students should consider how, by putting items previously thrown away in a collection displayed to the public, Molina showed that those items had value.
- (4) Assessment: Have students write their responses to the following prompt in their notebooks: How did Molina help people learn about waste? How did Molina's childhood help him learn about waste? In their responses, students should
 - a. Note that Molina's family did not have a lot of money and that he found and fixed toys for himself and his siblings and
 - b. Describe how the collection helped people see the useful things they were throwing away.
- (5) Prepare to show the video *Talkin Trash* featuring William Rathje (see resources for link). Explain that the video takes place in a landfill. Define the terms waste management and municipal solid waste (MSW) and landfill. Municipal solid waste (MSW) includes packaging, food, yard trimmings, furniture, electronics, tires and appliances (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2012). Waste management refers to "the planning, coordination and direction of those functions related to generation, handling, treatment, storage, transportation and disposal of

waste, as well as associated surveillance and maintenance activities” ([United States Department of Energy, 2025](#)).

- a. Begin the video. Pause around 2:53. Here, Rathje talks about the material he found in greatest abundance in the landfill. Ask students to predict what Rathje found.
 - b. Pause again after 3:00. Rathje found paper, a recyclable material, which was the most found material in the landfill.
 - c. Using a Venn diagram in their garbology logs, students should compare and contrast what Rathje found in the landfill to what they found in their classroom.
- (6) Explain that tomorrow they will get to talk to a waste management specialist. Ask students to brainstorm a list of questions they would like to ask. Prompt students to draw on their findings and *Gifts from the Garbage Truck* for ideas. Possible questions include but are not limited to:
- a. What types of items/materials does the site accept?
 - b. What materials can the site not accept? Why?
 - c. How do they arrive at the site? For example, is there a weekly pickup schedule from people’s homes or do they have to bring the items themselves?
 - d. What do people need to do to prepare their materials for recycling or disposal (e.g. sorting materials by type)?
 - e. What happens to different materials once they are at the site?
 - f. What happens to materials they cannot accept?
- (7) Assessment: Ask students to respond to the following prompt in their garbology logs. What did I learn about the things we throw away, and what could, or should, we do about it? In their responses, students should
- a. Re-state topics discussed in relation to the reading and
 - b. Posit ideas around how to solve the problems they identified in the reading.

Expansion

Estimated time to complete: One hour to several hours depending on how students interact with the sanitation workers. Ideally, students will take a field trip to a local landfill or recycling center. If this is not possible, teachers might ask a worker to visit the classroom or arrange a virtual visit.

Objective: Students will interview a sanitation worker in-person or virtually to understand waste management and sanitation work in their cities and communities.

Assessment: Students will consider what they want the public to know about waste disposal in their city or community.

Procedure

- (1) Bring in a five-pound weight or an item that weighs five pounds. Let students hold the weight. Tell students that according to the Environmental Protection Agency, in 2018 Americans disposed of 292.4 million pounds of municipal solid waste per day, which is about 4.9, or 5, pounds per person. Ask students to predict what kinds of things people throw away. Show the pie chart on page 8 of the municipal food waste report (see resources) (schools, restaurants, supermarkets or homes).

- (2) Preview the field trip or guest speaker.
 - a. If students are conducting a site visit, ensure they are wearing the proper footwear and review and safety procedures with the host beforehand.
 - b. Review the list of questions for the sanitation worker(s) generated the previous day. Decide how the questions will be asked, the order and assign roles to students.
 - c. Explain and demonstrate how students can or should greet and then thank the sanitation worker(s). This may depend on the class culture. For example, does the class have a handshake or greeting ritual they can share with the sanitation worker? We recommend asking students to shake hands either before or after the visit as a way to preview the *Handshake Thanking Ritual* they might learn about later.
- (3) Facilitate the visit with the sanitation worker (field trip or class visit)
 - a. Students should have their garbology logs for notes, sketches and reflections.
- (4) Assessment: Students should respond to the following prompt in their garbology logs. What should people in my community know about waste, waste disposal and sanitation workers? In their responses, students should
 - a. Share information they have learned about waste, disposal and sanitation workers and
 - b. Make connections to the reading on garbage.

Expression

Estimated time to complete: 45 min.

Objective: Students will raise awareness about waste management in their community through a sanitation soiree.

Assessment: Students will demonstrate their knowledge about waste management by curating a visual representation of their learning. At minimum, students should create and curate their trash collages to display in the classroom or a school space (e.g media center or local library). Students and teachers that want to do more could create an evening program for families and community members and more elaborate exhibits and a formalized program.

Procedure

- (1) Create and curate trash collages.
 - a. Students will use the trash they have collected to create their trash collages. Students will glue the “found” trash they found onto a piece of cardboard. Teachers should prepare cardboard in advance. Use recycled cardboard or ask students to use cereal boxes (a great way to recycle). Ask students to prepare their displays. When students are ready, spray their board with glue. The boards (and hands!) will get sticky. We recommend having wipes and hand-washing facilities available for immediate use.
 - b. Students should include an artist’s statement to accompany their collage. Their statement might address their impressions of the trash as well as concerns about trash disposal and possible solutions.

- c. Assessment. Students should share their collages. This could be done in small groups or as a gallery walk. In their garbology logs, students should make connections between the collages and reflect on what they learned by putting the collages together. Ask: What did you learn about waste management from your collage? What do the class collages have in common? What can we learn about waste from this activity? In their responses, students should
 - a. Provide a cumulative reflection on what they have learned so far.
 - b. Notice similarities between the collages. For example, the presence of a lot of similar items such as individual chip bags might raise awareness about packaging and snacking habits. With this insight, anti-litter messaging might be targeted towards certain items.
- d. As a class, decide how and where to display the collages. For example, will the collages stay in the classroom or the school or community's media center?

Optional activities

- (1) Handshake thanking ritual.
 - a. Explain that students will learn about one more person who also tried to use art to raise awareness about trash and sanitation work in New York City. In the following lecture to Queens College, Ukelele describes her *Handshake Thanking Ritual*, where she told sanitation workers, "Thank you for keeping the city alive" (Cascone, 2020).
Show only 14:15–20:36 (see resources for link).
 - b. Ask students why they think Ukeles wanted to shake the workers' hands. Explain to students that in many cities around the world, and especially in New York City, art is highly valued and protected. Ukeles joked that perhaps now the city's sanitation department, which was struggling from underfunding, could qualify for a National Endowment for the Arts grant – a very prestigious award for the best artists in the United States. Ask students why Ukeles wanted people to see both the waste in the landfills and the sanitation workers who manage it. Based on this project and their experience talking to sanitation workers, what do students think should be done about waste in the city, and what can we do for sanitation workers?
- (2) Garbage as gift. Ask students to recall Nelson Molina's actions in *Gifts from the Garbage Truck* and how he helped his city learn more about waste through his collection. Explain that students will watch a short video showing Nelson at work. Show the clips and pause to discuss using the prompts provided.
 - a. Clip 1: 1:56–2:21 Introducing Molina and the collection. Pause after this clip to ask students what they notice has been thrown away and how Molina has categorized the items in the collection.
 - b. Clip 2: 3:15–4:53. At the end of this clip, Molina holds up a letter from the White House and says, "If they can throw this out, they can throw anything out." Draw students' attention to Molina's statement. Ask what he meant by that. Is Molina only referring to trash, or is there a deeper lesson here?
 - c. Clip 3: 8:15–8:45. In this clip, Molina explains what he wants to happen to his collection, and he ends by stating, "Everything can have a home." Ask students what they learned from this clip and what Molina means by "everything can have a home." Is Molina talking about more than just trash? How does Molina help us see trash as treasure?

- (3) Math extension. Put students into small groups and give each group a bag of clean garbage. Provide each student with a pair of gloves.
 - a. Tell students they have ten minutes to sort and categorize the garbage to create three categories of their choosing. For very young students, provide three buckets, bags or boxes for students to use for sorting.
 - b. Set a timer for 10 minutes.
 - c. Bring students back together to compare and contrast their sorting strategies (e.g. paper, plastic and Styrofoam).
 - d. Depending on students' ages and math experiences, each group should graph their garbage according to the categories they created. Share out the graphs. If students are not ready to graph, students can count items in each category and write their findings in their garbology logs.
 - e. Ask students what they learned about the waste from their classroom from doing this activity.
- (4) Community Sanitation Soiree. Students will create and curate trash collages to display at the soiree.
 - a. As a class, formulate a plan to do further research, represent findings and present or curate the exhibits. Students can brainstorm ways to involve participants through panel discussions, trash trivia, multimedia presentations and the collages.
 - b. Assign roles to students. Roles include curating the collages, designing and sending the invitations (with a rationale for the sanitation soiree) and creating the exhibits.
 - c. Host the soiree in your classroom or another space in your school or community.

Conclusion

Waste is revelatory (Moore, 2012). The things we throw away tell us as much about ourselves as what we keep or value. Trash, garbage and waste are generally put and thought to have their proper place in the out of sight. When in sight, waste disturbs and disrupts (Moore, 2012) as it reminds us of the byproducts of our consumption. As such, it serves as an “archive . . . a source of knowledge about contemporary geographies of production, consumption, and waste management practices” (p. 786). This lesson, and *Gifts from the Garbage Truck*, asks students what it means to put waste out of sight.

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Resources

Rathje, W. (n.d.), “Garbologist-Talkin Trash [YouTube]”, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PK3r87LywM

Sanitation Foundation (n.d.), available at: <https://www.sanitationfoundation.org/m11-treasures-in-the-trash>

Touch Sanitation (n.d.), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiRGoKG5kIw>
Waste Management and Remediation Services Graphing Trash (n.d.), available at: <https://r-board.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Graphing-Trash.pdf>

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Further reading

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