

Lesson 4: Subjects vs. Objects

PURPOSE

To help students understand and respect human dignity in their everyday lives.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand that persons should always be treated as subjects, and never merely as objects.
2. Recognize the violations of human dignity in their immediate surroundings (e.g. school, family, country, sports clubs, friendships etc.) and think of ways to respond to the recognized violations.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Subject-Object Case Studies
- Violations of Human Dignity in School
- Violations of Human Dignity Outside School

VOCABULARY

- Treating persons as subjects: valuing persons for their intrinsic worth
- Treating persons as objects: using persons for one's pleasure or benefit

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Review the previous lesson. Recall human dignity as the special value that distinguishes humans from all other living and non-living beings. Recall the ways in which the word dignity is usually understood. Highlight that human dignity is the most fundamental meaning. Recall the three characteristics of human dignity: that it is universal, intrinsic and inalienable.

Step 2: Introduce the subject-object distinction with the [Subject-Object Distinction Handout](#). Explain that we use objects as means to achieve some other goals or ends. Subjects can never be used as means. Subjects are to be valued for their dignity.

All non-living beings fall under the category of objects (things, technology, tools, etc.) and, to a certain extent, plants fall under the category of objects as well (though not in the same way as mere things). Human persons alone fall under the category of subjects.

Ask students to suggest what should be written in the empty lines to complete the table? Use the [Subject-Object Distinction Handout - Teacher's Answers](#) below to help make suggestions. Have students write down the answers to fill in and complete their Handout.

| Objects | Subjects |
|---|---|
| Are to be used | Are to be valued |
| We manipulate | We respect |
| The most we can do is like them | We can love |
| We don't care how they feel | We show empathy |
| We do with them as we please | We ask for their opinion |
| Can be disposed of | Should be cared for |
| Have price | Priceless / worth the infinite / have dignity |
| We can own, buy and sell | Own themselves |
| Get rid of when no longer useful, productive | Protect when they can't do it themselves |
| Don't enter into relation with us (relation is one-sided) | Develop (two-sided) relationships |
| Talk at | Talk to |

Step 3: Ask the students what would happen if we switched the right and left columns on the table above. For example, it would mean:

- Care for objects, and dispose of subjects
- Talk at subjects, and talk to objects
- Own, buy and sell subjects (has this ever happened before?)
- Value objects and use subjects, etc.

Introduce the idea that because we, as persons, have dignity, we should always be treated as subjects, and never merely as objects. Persons should never be valued simply for their usefulness, etc. Highlight that whenever a person is treated as an object, this violates their dignity.

Write on the board:

- Treating persons as subjects: valuing persons for their intrinsic worth
- Treating persons as objects: using persons for one's pleasure or benefit

The opposite of love is not hate, but use. Hate is an emotion that can only be directed toward another person. We can't hate a thing. We use things – like toothbrushes, cars , computers – to achieve an end. But a person is valuable in and of themselves.

Highlight once more: what does it mean to treat someone as an object?

When we treat other people as objects, we use that person for our pleasure, advantage or benefit. Rather than recognizing what would be good for that person, we focus on what the person can do for us. When we use people merely to get what we want rather than caring for their wellbeing, we are treating them like we treat tools such as cell phones or a hammer. This way of treating human beings goes against their dignity.

Ask the students if they can think of any examples from their surroundings where persons were treated as objects. You can help them by mentioning some cases:

- Spending time with someone because they have money and I can benefit from it
- Manipulate someone because I want to achieve some goal
- Spending time with someone so they will do me a favor
- Gossiping about someone to make myself look better than them
- Appear that I'm interested in someone just because I want to approach his friend
- Lying to someone to make them do something I want, etc.
- Using others for pleasure (prostitution/ sex trade).

Step 4: Divide students into groups. Each group will get one [Subject-Object Case Study](#) to analyze. Students should be able to recognize if the person in the case was treated as a subject or an object, explain why the situation violates human dignity and come up with solutions to the situation (e.g. what would you do differently). Each group should also consider if a similar situation happened in their class or school, how they would react.

After students discuss the cases in groups, have each group present its conclusions in front of others. Lead the discussion using the *Teacher's Answer Key*.

Step 5: Divide students into groups and give them the [Violations of Human Dignity in the School Worksheet](#). Each group should think about three situations which represent violations of human dignity in their class or school and write them on the worksheet. To help the students understand the task, you can provide them with the sample answer available in the Materials.

After groups finish the discussion, each group will present its results to the others, and the teacher will lead the discussion with the whole class. The discussion should lead to deciding which actions are disrespectful of human dignity – actions that they will stop choosing in class, and actions they can take to affirm the human dignity of each classmate.

Step 6: To expand the student's understanding of how persons can be treated as objects in situations other than those in school, lead the class discussion based on the [Violations of Human Dignity Outside School Discussion Guide](#).

Explain that people have an innate sense that a person is different from an insect, is different from a tree and that human beings should be treated differently. People have an innate desire to be respected by others, and an innate repulsion when they realize they are being used by someone.

Step 7: Summarize the lesson. Recall the subject-object distinction and different examples of actions where persons are used as objects inside and outside school. Highlight that persons should always be treated as subjects, never merely as objects.

SUBJECT-OBJECT DISTINCTION HANDOUT

| Objects | Subjects |
|--|---|
| Are to be used | Are to be valued |
| We manipulate | We respect |
| The most we can do is like them | We can love |
| We don't care how they feel | We show empathy |
| We do with them as we please | We ask for their opinion |
| Can be disposed of | Should be cared for |
| Have price | Priceless / worth the infinite / have dignity |
| We can own, buy and sell | |
| Get rid of when no longer useful, productive | |
| | Develop (two-sided) relationships |
| | Talk to |

SUBJECT-OBJECT CASE STUDIES**Case study 1**

One day you were heading out for lunch, when you heard yelling around you. You noticed students were starting a fight. You couldn't tell at the beginning what was happening. It seemed there were two groups of students fighting. When one student was pressed onto the wall, you could see that it was actually four students against one. He couldn't fight them off and you weren't sure that he was even trying. None of the students standing around did anything. When teachers approached, the students who were fighting ran away. Only the student who was attacked stayed there, but the teachers assumed he was to blame. The teachers started asking bystanders if they had seen who was fighting. The student who was attacked was terrified and too afraid to say anything. The rest just said they didn't know anything. This was obviously a lie since everybody knew who the attackers were but didn't want to get called snitches. The teachers told the students that they would punish the student, since they thought he had started it. After the teachers left, the attacked student asked some of the bystanders why they didn't tell the truth, but everybody said that it was none of their business and that everybody was old enough to take care of themselves.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

- Are any of the persons in this story treated as an object? If yes, which one and by whom?
- Is this person's dignity fully respected? Why or why not?
- In this case, what behavior would be consistent with respecting human dignity?

Case study 2

The school year started and there were several new students in your school, including a girl in your class who transferred from a nearby town. She seemed quite shy and introverted. She is not very talkative and doesn't approach other students, but rather, waits for others to approach her. She is not very confident and is always hiding her face with her dark hair. You think this makes her look strange and a bit scary. One day you met with a friend who attends the new girls' former school. During the conversation, you mentioned the new girl and your friend recognized her name. She told you that she transferred to your school because she was weird, she looked funny, and is awkward when people try to befriend her. The way she described her made you laugh because those were precisely the things about her that bothered you and you were glad that you weren't the only one who found her strange. The next day, when you came to class, you told the classmate who sits next to you about the things you learned about the new girl. She also found it funny. Soon, everyone in the class knew about the funny stories. During a lunch break, you noticed she tried to sit with other classmates at the table, but other students told her there was no room for her. She came to your desk too, but you laughed and your friends told her your desk was full, although there were a few empty chairs.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

- Are any of the persons in the story treated as objects?
- Is this person's dignity fully respected? Why or why not?
- In this case, what behavior would be consistent with respecting human dignity?

Case study 3:

You joined a school journal club a year ago. Since it is a very small club, each person carries a lot of responsibility. Because of this, a few students quit the club. A few months later, you were chosen as president, which resulted in even more responsibilities. This year, a very enthusiastic student joined. He is a great help to you and you talk to each other often, but you don't think you value his friendship as much as he values yours. Still, you spend time with him as you don't want him to feel rejected and leave the club. You also don't want the responsibilities falling onto you again. You continue to make him think that you are good friends and give him more and more tasks to do in the club. At one point he starts saying that he doesn't have so much time anymore to help with the club and he would like to take a break. You said you understand but flatter him to make him feel happier and more appreciated. You also invent a story about the English teacher saying to you privately that those who will be most engaged in the book club will get a higher grade at the end of the year. You know that having the highest grades is important to him and that this will motivate him. After a few days, you tell him that if he wants to get a higher grade, he should take on some additional responsibilities. So, you give him some tasks you don't feel like doing. He also doesn't like doing them, but still does them, thinking this will help his grade. Later, he talks to you and says that he really has a hard time doing all the tasks and that they are really stressing him out. You appear to be very understanding but bring up the fake story about the teacher asking you to report the most active students in the club so that they could be rewarded at the end of the year. Obviously, this is a lie, but you want to make sure that the student stays in the club and does the tasks that need to be done.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

- Are any of the persons in the story treated as objects?
- Is this person's dignity fully respected? Why or why not?
- In this case, what behavior would be consistent with respecting human dignity?

Subject-Object Case Studies – Teacher Answer Key**Case study 1:**

1. The student who was attacked was treated as an object by the students who attacked him. It could also be argued that the bystanders treated the attacked person as an object of their curiosity without concerning themselves with the question of what would be good or helpful for that person.
2. The person's dignity is not fully respected since physical and psychological violence violates the human dignity of the attacked person. Also, lying to teachers, which led to the attacked student being punished, does not respect the dignity of another person.
3. Respectful behavior would imply stopping the harassment either by the attackers themselves, or the bystanders could at least try to help the student by making it clear that they do not approve of such behavior, instead of passively encouraging it by standing there and watching it happening.

Case study 2:

1. The girl who transferred from a nearby town is treated as an object by those who are making fun of her behind her back, and especially by the main character in the situation where she does not let her sit at the table with others.
2. This person's dignity is not fully respected since making fun of her behind her back does not lead to them respecting her human dignity, but instead treats her as the object of their conversation as a joke. Not allowing her to sit at the table together with the others is also disrespectful of her dignity since it will embarrass her in front of everyone.
3. The respectful behavior would be to stop making fun of the new student and sharing every bit of gossip about her behind her back. Also, after hearing the similar gossip, one could turn things to a positive side and say that she is new and it is understandable that she is shy, and that everyone just needs to get to know her better. A great occasion for this would be inviting the new student to sit together at the table with the others so that everyone can get to know her better and help her to feel comfortable.

Case study 3:

1. The enthusiastic student was treated as an object by the president of the school journal club because he used flattery and outright lies for his own benefit, i.e. to make things easier for himself.
2. This person's dignity is not fully respected since the president did not consider what would be good or helpful for that person and act accordingly, but he fully disregarded the person's well-being for his own benefit.
3. The president should acknowledge the enthusiastic student's feedback and discuss with him how they jointly make things easier for him. The president could also think how he could attract more enthusiastic students who could take some work from him. The president could make sure that the student is happy with his engagement in the club and reduce the total number of activities if there are not enough volunteers to do them.

VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN SCHOOL

Think about one example in which persons are treated as objects or their dignity is otherwise disrespected at school. Explain why this situation is not respectful of that persons' dignity. Propose how the class should deal with this situation.

| Description of the situation | Why it is disrespectful of human dignity | Possible solutions |
|------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| | | |

Violations of Human Dignity in School – Sample Answer

Think about one example in which persons are treated as objects or their dignity is disrespected at school. Explain why this situation is not respectful of their dignity. Propose a solution for how the class should deal with this situation.

| Description of the situation | Why it is disrespectful of human dignity | Possible solutions |
|---|---|---|
| <p>A student who is not very outgoing and who studies hard is often called a “nerd” and teased by other students. A group of “cool” guys from our class and some other classes are often making fun of him in front of others. Sometimes this also turns into bullying and some form of physical violence (e.g. slapping him, throwing his things around). Most of the other students are usually just standing by not doing anything. Some are laughing at this, some feel uncomfortable but don’t say anything.</p> | <p>Calling someone names that are intended to undermine their confidence, is not respecting their dignity. Calling someone a “nerd” does not respect their dignity as it ignores how a person will feel. Making fun of someone is a way of treating someone as an object, to be used for a joke or a laugh. They are also treating this person as an object instead of a subject, if they are not talking to him, but at him; they are not trying to develop a relationship with him.</p> | <p>Those who stand by and look at how the student is being bullied should stand up and say that what’s happening is not right.</p> <p>They should also report to educators if the situation continues to happen.</p> <p>Those in the group of “cool” kids who feel that what they are doing is not right, should motivate the group to find another kind of amusement which will not be disrespectful of anyone’s human dignity (e.g. sports, dance, physical exercise etc.).</p> |

VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN DIGNITY OUTSIDE SCHOOL DISCUSSION GUIDE

If time permits, choose from the following questions and lead the class in discussion. Use the answer key below each question.

» Are persons sometimes treated as objects in romantic relationships?

Answer key:

Persons are treated as objects in romantic relationships whenever someone uses the other person for their own pleasure or enjoyment, and doesn't respect their dignity. In these situations, the one who treats the other as an object, always cares more for what he can get from the other person, rather than respecting the other and what's good for them. It can happen that two people mutually treat each other as objects for their pleasure or enjoyment. This can seem like a happy relationship but it is still treating a person as an object, which goes against their dignity, even if it's mutual.

» Do employers sometimes treat workers as objects?

Answer key:

In the workplace, it is necessary that both employers and workers agree on the common goal they are pursuing, such as producing better quality food, providing better education, offering a restful experience to the hotel guests, etc. This can apply to companies, to the military, or almost any other organization. To more efficiently achieve goals of the organization, often in the organization some people with more knowledge, skills or experience are in charge, and some others follow them. Nevertheless, it sometimes does happen that persons in charge: leaders, owners, presidents or CEOs, do treat their subordinates as objects. This happens whenever they want to achieve the goal of the company at the expense of the individuals: e.g. asking them to work overtime and not paying the extra hours, exposing their workers to harm (safety or health hazards employees are not informed about), lying about company goals or activities, asking them to do something that goes against their values, etc.

» Do we sometimes treat persons as objects in the family?

Answer key:

This unfortunately sometimes also happens. Even though the family is the best place to learn to treat others as subjects, this does not always happen. Sometimes parents treat children as objects: e.g. when excessively punishing them even though this will not help children improve themselves, or when parents of older children want to impose their wishes on them (e.g. with regard to deciding which career to pick). Sometimes children treat parents as objects: e.g. when they are being careless if they are hurting their parents with their words, if they are lying to their parents to get something from them (such as a new gadget or money), or if they expect their parents to do all of the housework or clean up after them.

» Is there objectification in the media and culture?

Answer key:

Yes, unfortunately there is objectification in the media and culture. We can see that in TV or online commercials where women or men are shown simply for their physical looks or what they can offer to someone else (pleasure, money, access, fame, etc.) Some movies and books also promote achieving success by using other persons for personal advantage. On the other hand, objects are sometimes treated almost like persons (e.g. we are suggested that they can bring happiness, that we can build relationships with them or love them). One person said that the problem with the world today is that we treat persons as objects, and objects as persons.