

Lesson 4: Subjects vs. Objects

PURPOSE

To understand that persons should always be treated as subjects and never merely as objects.

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. Commit to treating their classmates as subjects with human dignity.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Subject or Object Sleuth worksheet
- Subject/Object Theater
- Start-Stop worksheet

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 the difference between internal and external qualities and how we learn about them. Highlight that the deepest and the most important quality that distinguishes humans from all other living and non-living beings is human dignity. Recall the three characteristics of human dignity: universal, intrinsic, and inalienable. Review the answers to the Cases of [Dis/Respecting Dignity](#) worksheet with the class, using the Answer Key for the Teacher.

Step 2: Introduce the subject-object distinction. Draw a table on the board like the one below.

Subjects	Objects

Explain to the students that by subjects, we refer to human persons, and by objects, we refer to all other non-living and living beings (cell phone, a flower, etc.). Ask students to name some examples of subjects and objects and write them in the appropriate categories in the table. If students have trouble coming up with examples, you can prompt them with some of the following examples:

SUBJECTS: Parents, Classmates, Teachers, Neighbors

persons who are homeless

Person who works at the grocery store

OBJECTS: Computers, pens, clothing, vehicles, jewelry

Fruits, trees, grass, flowers, grain, etc.

Dogs, cats, cattle, horses, fish, etc.

To reinforce the subject and object distinction, ask students the following questions:

- Is a homeless person a subject or an object? [Subject]
- Is your cell phone a subject or an object? [Object]
- Is a severely disabled person a subject or an object? [Subject]
- What about indigenous people, or persons of another race? [Subjects]
- Is your favorite item (clothing, gadget, etc.) a subject or an object? [Object]

Step 3: Explain that there is a fundamental difference between how one should treat objects and how one should treat subjects. We can use objects but we can never use subjects. Why? The essential difference between subjects and objects is that subjects have human dignity, while objects do not. Objects can be bought or sold, and one can own them, and this can never be the case with subjects. Objects are disposable and we can throw them out or give them away when they are no longer useful. Subjects are to be valued and respected, regardless of whether they are old, sick, disabled or struggling.

We should care how subjects feel, how our behaviors affect other subjects and we should also ask for their opinion when we want them to do something. On the other hand, no one would think of asking their computer whether they feel well enough to work today.

While we can like objects, we can only truly love and be friends with subjects. Objects cannot enter into a friendship with one another. They cannot become best friends.

Animals also fall within the category of objects, but since they have the power to feel emotions, such as pain, pleasure, fear, etc., we should be attentive to their needs and not cause them any fear or pain.

Finally, it would be wrong to treat persons as objects, just as it would be wrong to treat computers, cars, or cellphones as subjects. If one were to say that he values his car more than his own life, that would be wrong. Similarly, if someone were to say that a person could be disposed of like a used phone when no longer useful, this would be wrong also.

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

Provide students with the [Subject or Object Sleuth](#) worksheet for them to complete individually. After all students have finished the questions, review the answers using the Teacher Answer Key.

Explain that when we treat other people as objects, it means that rather than recognizing what would be good for that person, we focus on what the person can do for us. When we use people simply to get what we want, rather than caring about what is most excellent for them, we are treating them like we treat tools, such as cell phones or hammers. This way of treating human beings goes against their dignity.

Step 4: Divide students into groups and give each group one of the [Subject-Object Theater](#) scenes to perform. Give the groups a few minutes to read the short script together and decide on who will play which part. Then, have groups present their scene in front of the class. After each scene, brainstorm a resolution or "alternate ending" for the scene, using the Subject-Object Theater Teacher Prompts.

Step 5: Summarize. Recall the subject-object distinction and the proper ways to treat both subjects and objects. Emphasize that persons should always be treated as subjects, and never merely as objects.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Provide students with the [Start-Stop worksheet](#). Have students think about three specific ways in which students are sometimes treated as objects in school. Then, consider what should be done to treat everyone as subjects. Write these down in the Start-Stop worksheet. To work towards ensuring everyone is properly respected as a subject, in the next class, gather the worksheets and decide as a class on three things to commit to stop doing and three things to start doing. Write the final Start-Stop list on a large piece of paper visible in the classroom and have all students sign the paper, to remind students of their commitment to treat everyone as subjects equal in dignity.

8. "She doesn't really ask about how I feel. It's always about her."
subject-subject **subject-object**
9. "How much did you get from him for your birthday?!"
subject-subject **subject-object**
10. "My Grandparents don't have a lot of money. For my birthday they said they'd take me out to dinner but I said I'd be just as happy with a home cooked meal."
subject-subject **subject-object**
11. "She's my best friend because she buys me something when I go shopping with her."
subject-subject **subject-object**
12. "He always asks what I think is the best decision, instead of telling me what to do."
subject-subject **subject-object**
13. "You're going to leave me, after all I've done for you? I basically own you."
subject-subject **subject-object**
14. "He said that if I really worked at school and got my grades up that I could go to college."
subject-subject **subject-object**
15. "It doesn't matter what clothes he wears; he's just such a great person to be around!"
subject-subject **subject-object**

Subject or Object Sleuth - Answer Key for the Teacher

1. "My friend Kyle is my best friend because he helps me try to be a better person."
subject-subject **subject-object**
2. "My Mom said she'd buy me a new phone if I call her every day with it."
subject-subject **subject-object**
3. "My Mom said she would like me to call her every day, but she's not going to bribe me with a phone because that isn't love."
subject-subject **subject-object**
4. "The teacher is so boring! When she is explaining something I just laugh with my friends."
subject-subject **subject-object**
5. "You can learn something from everyone and so I listen respectfully to my teacher."
subject-subject **subject-object**
6. "Mike? We're not really friends. I just hang out with him because there's no one else to play with."
subject-subject **subject-object**
7. "She encourages me to pursue excellence in school and to develop my talents."
subject-subject **subject-object**
8. "She doesn't really ask about how I feel. It's always about her."
subject-subject **subject-object**
9. "How much did you get from him for your birthday?!"
subject-subject **subject-object**
10. "My Grandparents don't have a lot of money. For my birthday they said they'd take me out to dinner but I said I'd be just as happy with a home cooked meal."
subject-subject **subject-object**

11. “She’s my best friend because she buys me something when I go shopping with her.”
subject-subject **subject-object**
12. “He always asks what I think is the best decision, instead of telling me what to do.”
subject-subject **subject-object**
13. “You’re going to leave me, after all I’ve done for you? I basically own you.”
subject-subject **subject-object**
14. “He said that if I really worked at school and got my grades up that I could go to college.”
subject-subject **subject-object**
15. “It doesn’t matter what clothes he wears; he’s just such a great person to be around!”
subject-subject **subject-object**

SUBJECT/OBJECT THEATER

SCENE 1: Four friends are playing video games.

John: Can we go out and play? I don't want to be inside anymore.

Taylor: No, I want to keep playing.

Tim: Yeah, let's keep playing. I'm winning.

Sawyer: John just doesn't want to play because he's losing.

John: That's not true.

Sawyer: Yeah right, just admit that you suck.

Tim: Or he's afraid of the dark.

Taylor: Don't cry!

John: I'm not crying, I just wanted to get some exercise. We've been sitting inside all day.

PAUSE SCENE

SCENE 2: Four friends receive their marks back in math class.

Narrator: The class just received the grades from the math test they took last week. Mark again scored the best.

Mark: I am always the best at everything. I don't even study. It's just... easy!

Ashley: I do homework every night and I still don't get straight A's.

Danielle: I don't do homework.

(Ashley and Scott laugh.)

Scott: That's why you're failing.

Danielle: That's why I'm not a nerd like Mark.

Ashley: I don't want to be the kind of person who talks about math questions outside of class.

Scott: I'd hate to be a nerd.

PAUSE SCENE

SCENE 3: Tina Leaves Her Phone on Her Desk

Narrator: Luke wants to be as funny as Tina. People like Tina because of her sense of humor. Luke wants this for himself.

Luke (thinking out loud): Tina is so funny and everybody likes her. I want that.

Narrator: Suzy is also Tina's friend, but she sometimes gets jealous of Tina.

Suzy: My life is terrible compared to hers. I will never be able to make friends as easily as she does.

Narrator: Tina leaves to use the washroom and Suzy sees Tina's phone lying unlocked on her desk.

Luke: Is that Tina's phone?

Suzy: Yeah, she left it unlocked. Oh my gosh, Tina wrote this?

Luke: What did she write?

Narrator: Suzy and Luke look at the private notes Tina wrote on her phone.

Luke: Screenshot them and send them to me!

Suzy: Let's ...

(Tina walks in the classroom)

PAUSE SCENE

Subject/Object Theater – Teacher’s Prompts

SCENE: 1

PAUSE SCENE

Teacher’s Prompt for Class:

John is right that it’s not really healthy to sit inside in the dark and play video games all day. But his friends are not treating him like a subject of equal value. They don’t listen to his opinion, they toss it away and make fun of him as a person, instead. In this way, they are not treating John like a subject of value as a person and a friend.

Class Brainstorm: how could this story be resolved in a way that respects everyone’s human dignity?

SCENE: 2

PAUSE SCENE

Teacher’s Prompt for Class:

Is Mark seeing his fellow classmates as a subject or an object? Are his classmates viewing Mark as a subject or an object? Mark shouldn’t have been bragging about his marks, as he wasn’t considering how he was making other people feel who didn’t do as well on the test. In this way, Mark wasn’t seeing his classmates as subjects of equal value. But the others shouldn’t be calling him a nerd, just because they are insecure about their marks. His classmates did not treat Mark as a subject of equal value, but an object to be made fun of.

Class Brainstorm: how could this story be resolved in a way that respects human dignity and treats participants like subjects of equal value?

SCENE: 3

PAUSE SCENE

Teacher’s Prompt for Class:

Are Luke and Suzy acting like real friends to Tina? No, they are treating Tina like an object in that they are trying to gain from her popularity and good sense of humor. Tina might have developed a good sense of humor because she’s gone through a lot of hard things in her own life and tries to look on the positive side. Luke and Suzy are not actually getting to know Tina – they’re seeing her just as an object who has something that they want.

Class Brainstorm: how could this scene be resolved so that all three characters are treated with respect as subjects equal in dignity?

START-STOP WORKSHEET

In order to practice treating everyone as a subject, equal in dignity...

This class solemnly decides to STOP doing the following things:

STOP	
1	
2	
3	

The whole class solemnly decides to START doing the following things:

START	
1	
2	
3	

Signatures of classmates: