

## 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. Recognize when human dignity is violated in concrete everyday situations.
3. Commit to treating their classmates as subjects with human dignity.

### MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- The Subjects and Objects Quiz
- Case Studies on Subject/Object
- 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.

**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:

**SUBJECTS:** Parents, classmates, teachers, neighbors, persons who are homeless, the grocery store clerk, etc.

**OBJECTS:** Computers, pens, clothing, vehicles, jewelry, etc.

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]
- What about your mobile phone? [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 for our own goals and ends, but we can never use subjects as a means to achieve our goals. Why? The essential difference between subjects and objects is that subjects have human dignity, while objects do not. Objects have finite value, while subjects have infinite worth. 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, infirm or disabled.

We should care how subjects feel, how our behaviors affect others 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. To develop a friendship or a loving relationship, two subjects are needed. Objects cannot enter into a relationship with one another.

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, 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

Explain that when we treat other people as objects, we use that person for our pleasure 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 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.

Provide students with the [Subjects and Objects Quiz](#) for them to complete individually. After all students have finished their quiz, ask students to volunteer to share their answers with the class. Review the correct answers together, using the Teacher Answer Key.

**Step 4:** Divide students into two groups and give each group one of the [Case Studies on Subject/Object](#). Instruct the groups to discuss the case studies together and answer the corresponding questions. In each case study, the groups should be able to explain why a person is treated as an object and identify the correct approach to handling the situation. The groups should also propose how one could deal with this situation in different roles (e.g. if one is a victim, a bystander or the one who treats the other as an object).

Ask the groups to share their conclusions with the rest of the class. Encourage students to share their comments and suggestions. Help students to properly evaluate each case using the Answer Key as a guide.

**Step 5:** Ask the students if they can think of situations in which a person is treated as an object rather than a subject at school, at home in interactions with a parent or sibling, on a sports team, etc. Instruct them not to mention names while sharing their stories so that no one is embarrassed or hurt, but just describe situations in a general way. Invite the rest of the class to share situation suggestions. Ask the class what they can do to treat others as subjects and affirm human dignity.

After listening to the students' comments and leading the class discussion, ask the class to decide, all together, three specific ways in which students are sometimes treated as objects in school and what the class will commit to doing differently, to work towards ensuring everyone is properly respected as a subject. Ask the class to come up with three ways in which students are treated as subjects and what they will do to make sure that this continues. Write the final list in the [Start-Stop](#) worksheet and place it somewhere in the classroom so it can be visible at all times to everyone. Make sure to follow up with the students in future classes to see if they are making excellent choices that accord with their class plan.

**Step 6:** 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. Emphasize the importance of sticking to the commitments made in the Start-Stop worksheet.

**SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS QUIZ**

Write "subjects" or "objects" on the empty line.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ should be respected.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ have dignity.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ can have a price, \_\_\_\_\_ cannot.
4. We can throw away \_\_\_\_\_ when they are no longer useful for us.
5. We are friends with \_\_\_\_\_.
6. It is excellent to care how \_\_\_\_\_ feel.
7. It is OK to use \_\_\_\_\_ to our advantage.
8. It is wrong to use \_\_\_\_\_ for our own gain.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ can be bought or sold, while \_\_\_\_\_ cannot.
10. No one can own \_\_\_\_\_.
11. We can truly love \_\_\_\_\_, while we can only like \_\_\_\_\_.
12. We should ask \_\_\_\_\_ for their opinion instead of imposing our will on them.

***Subjects and Objects Quiz – Answer Key for the Teacher***

1. Subjects should be respected.
2. Subjects have dignity.
3. Objects can have a price, subjects cannot.
4. We can throw away objects when they are no longer useful for us.
5. We are friends with subjects.
6. It is excellent to care how subjects feel.
7. It is OK to use objects to our advantage.
8. It is wrong to use subjects for our own gain.
9. Objects can be bought or sold, while subjects cannot.
10. No one can own subjects.
11. We can truly love subjects, while we can only like objects.
12. We should ask subjects for their opinion instead of imposing our will on them.

**CASE STUDIES ON SUBJECT/OBJECT****Case Study 1**

The dormitory is a place where students from all over the country come to live so that they can attend the high school they wish to attend, even if it is not in their hometown.

Each dormitory has rooms for boys and girls and in each hallway there is a room for socializing (common living room).

The school hires cleaners who take care to keep the rooms and common areas (living rooms) clean. One of the cleaners, Ms. Claudia, regularly cleans the common areas but also has a lot more work to do because of the mess made by some students.

Two students, George and Alice, think it's not their job to clean up and so they often leave cans of pop and leftover food around. Ms. Claudia often finds gum stuck to the bottoms of the chairs and wrappers on the floor. George and Alice are tired after a day at school and so they don't want to pick up after themselves. They don't think about the fact that Ms. Claudia will have to pick up all of their wrappers or chip bags, empty and recycle their cans of pop and scrape off their gum from the desks, after a long work day. When the teacher asked George and Alice not to leave a mess and to be considerate to Ms. Claudia, they simply said that it's her job to clean.

Tony and Sarah told Alice and George that they were being rude and disrespectful to Ms. Claudia. But Alice and George called them "goody goodies" when they cleaned up after everyone. Ms. Claudia was very thankful to Tony and Sarah because it meant that she could go home to her three children at a reasonable hour, feeling more respected by the students and less tired.

**Questions for a discussion:**

1. How do George and Alice treat Ms. Claudia and why?
2. How do Tony and Sarah treat Ms. Claudia and why?
3. Is Ms. Claudia's dignity respected or disrespected? How? Explain.

**CASE STUDIES ON SUBJECT/OBJECT****Case Study 2**

A girl named Elisabeth had to enroll in a new school because she was not accepted in the previous school.

At first glance, it is obvious that Elisabeth is different from the other students. She is visually impaired and moves with the help of a wheelchair since she was born with a severe form of cerebral palsy. The teacher encouraged the class to help her when she needed it, given her difficulties, and also warned the class that it is not nice to make fun of people who are different from us in any way.

Zara and Paul understood what the teacher wanted them to do and so they helped Elisabeth whenever she needed it and were always the first to volunteer to move her wheelchair. However, behind her back, they would complain, make jokes about Elizabeth and put her down. They did not want to include her in their group of friends because her presence made them uncomfortable.

On the other hand, Leah and Neal realized that it was not enough to just help Elisabeth with her wheelchair, but they also wanted to help her feel accepted and a part of the class, so they decided to invite her to hang out with them during school breaks.

Elisabeth loved and appreciated Leah and Neal's invitation to join them on their break, and not just when she needed immediate help. Thanks to them, for the first time, she felt truly accepted among her peers, which helped boost her self-confidence and helped her to trust others.

**Questions for a discussion:**

1. How did Zara and Paul treat their new classmate and why?
2. How did Leah and Neal treat their new classmate and why?
3. In what way was Elisabeth's dignity respected and disrespected? Explain.



**Case Studies – Answer Key for the Teacher****Case Study 1:**

**1. How do George and Alice treat Ms. Claudia and why?** George and Alice treated Ms. Claudia as an object whose only purpose was to clean their common room, and not as a person who has needs, working hours, and a family waiting for her after work.

**2. How do Tony and Sarah treat Ms. Claudia and why?** Tony and Sarah recognized that even though it is Ms. Claudia's job to clean for the school, it is not her job to clean up after them. Tony and Sarah recognized that if they cleaned up after themselves, this would also help Ms. Claudia. They treated her as a subject by showing respect for her and her time, choosing to tidy up after themselves so that she would not have to stay later at work.

**3. Is Ms. Claudia's dignity respected or disrespected? How? Explain.** Tony and Sarah respected Ms. Claudia's dignity because they treated her as a person who has an intrinsic worth, with whom one should feel empathy and treat with consideration. On the other hand, George and Alice disrespected Ms. Claudia's dignity since they treated her merely as a cleaner whose value (in their eyes) was reduced to her ability to clean for them.

**Case Study 2:**

**1. How did Zara and Paul treat their new classmate and why?** Zara and Paul treated Elisabeth as a subject by helping her to move the wheelchair. However, they treated her as an object by making fun of her disability and gossiping about her.

**2. How did Leah and Neal treat their new classmate and why?** Leah and Neal treated Elisabeth as a subject by helping her with her wheelchair or reading and writing, but also by inviting her to hang out with them during school breaks. They understood that Elisabeth needed to be treated as a person with dignity.

**3. In what way was Elisabeth's dignity respected and disrespected? Explain.** Zara and Paul disrespected Elisabeth's dignity since they did not treat her as a person with dignity to whom they should show empathy and respect, or invite to lunch. On the other hand, Leah and Neal respected Elisabeth's dignity since they cared for how she felt and made an extra effort to make her feel included and accepted by peers.

**Conclusion: You don't make yourself look great by making someone else look small.**

When you belittle others because you think you are better than they are, you actually show that you have no power - over yourself, your thoughts and your actions. People tend to make others feel how they themselves feel, whether that's great or small. Even if you can't always offer help, you can give respect to someone by offering a simple smile or nod in recognition of their human dignity.

**START-STOP WORKSHEET**

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

| STOP |
|------|
|      |
|      |
|      |

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

| START |
|-------|
|       |
|       |
|       |

Signatures of classmates: