

Lesson 1: Hierarchy of Being and Human Dignity

PURPOSE

To understand the special place human persons have in the world.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

1. Understand the powers humans share with animals and other living beings, and recognize the powers to think and choose as specifically human powers.
2. Understand human dignity as the universal, intrinsic and inalienable value of human persons.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Introductory Questionnaire
- Hierarchy of Being table
- [Video](#): What distinguishes humans from other animals? | Ken Miller

VOCABULARY

- Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons
- Universal: every person has dignity
- Intrinsic: it is within each person, simply because they are human
- Inalienable: dignity cannot be given or taken away from a person
- Power: the ability of a living being to do something on its own
- Power to Think: the human ability to know and connect ideas about oneself, others, and the world
- Power to Choose: the human ability to knowingly select between options

PRELIMINARY ACTIVITY

Ask the students to fill out the [Introductory Questionnaire](#) before the first class. If you consider it helpful, discuss some of the questions to learn more about the students' opinions on some of the most critical issues the course deals with.

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Introduce the purpose of the course.

Ask students what they expect to learn in the course.

Explain that the course will primarily deal with the following questions:

Who am I?
What am I capable of?
What can I become?

In academic courses, the students are mostly learning about the world around them. In this course, they have the opportunity to learn about themselves. Knowing oneself is the first step in determining how to live a good life, how to have authentic friendships, how to deal with problems, and how to give and receive respect.

Knowing oneself is the basis of understanding what one is capable of and what one can become. If someone can achieve excellence in what they do, they can become excellent as a person. One purpose of this class is to learn how to become excellent people. During the course of the following lessons, the students will learn what this means.

Step 2: Explain that the core concept the students will explore in this curriculum is called human dignity. Only humans have a special value called human dignity. This dignity makes them worthy of respect and gives them certain rights, but also responsibilities; and demands that all people behave in a certain way to nurture and protect this dignity.

Engage students by asking questions:

Do all people have dignity? [Yes, without exception.]
Who gives it to them? [No one, each person has it simply by being human.]
Can it be taken away from someone? [No, it is always with each person, it is intrinsic.]
Do some people have it less or more? [No, it is the same in everyone.]
Do people in comas, persons with disabilities, etc. have it? [Yes, everyone has it.]

After initial discussion, explain that the word “human” in “human dignity” means that all humans have it and that they have it simply by being human. Even though people differ in many ways, they all possess human dignity regardless of any differences. It is important to note that no one gives people human dignity – it is not granted by the society, political community, family, etc. Every person has it simply by being human and no one can take this value away from people. Human dignity does not exist in degrees – one cannot say that some people have more or less than others--each person is equal in dignity.

Then, define human dignity and its three characteristics. Write on the board:

Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons

Universal: every person has dignity

Intrinsic: it is within each person, simply because they are human

Inalienable: dignity cannot be given or taken away from a person

Step 3: Divide students into groups and hand them the [Hierarchy of Being table](#). Have them come up with three powers all living beings share, three which only animals and humans share, and two which only humans possess.

Write the following definition on the board:

Power: the ability of a living being to do something on its own

If the students have difficulty understanding the exercise, help them by asking the question: “Are plants able to move on their own from one place to another?” Explain that since the answer is no, that means they do not have this power. Obviously, someone could move the plant from one place to another, but the plants cannot do that by themselves without outside help. Of course, sometimes plant seeds disseminate, but this is not the same as moving on one’s own. The seed is usually taken to another place by the wind or by an animal, and not by the plant itself. Then, after the seed is taken to another place, a new plant grows. Point out how, on the other hand, animals and humans can move on their own, which means they do have this power. From these examples, help them to understand that the power to move from one place to another is the power of animals and humans, and not of plants. Follow the same approach to explain the other powers.

Step 4: Ask all groups to share their answers. Write an empty table on the board and fill it in as the students provide correct answers. The correctly filled table should look like the following:

	Plants	Animals	Humans
POWERS			
Eat	x	x	x
Grow	x	x	x
Reproduce	x	x	x
Move from place to place on their own		x	x
Use the senses		x	x
Feel emotions		x	x
Think			x
Choose			x

Explain that all living beings have powers to eat, grow and reproduce. Non-living beings like rocks can be divided into pieces by an outside force (e.g. if someone smashes them) but this is quite different from reproduction in living beings. Reproduction means creating a new member of one's species. When the rock is smashed, nothing new is created, but only the existing piece is divided into smaller pieces. Power to eat means that living beings are able to take in nutrients from the environment in order to sustain themselves. With the sufficient intake of nutrients and by receiving the needed support from the environment (e.g. warmth, parental support, etc.), living beings can grow and develop. Notice that the support from the environment helps living beings to grow, but it does not generate this growth. The growth is generated "from within" and each living being grows and develops following specific instructions coded for by their genes. These genes provide instructions and direction for growth.

Animals and humans share the extra powers which plants do not have. First, this is the power to use the senses, such as smell, touch, sight, sound and taste. With the senses, animals and humans gather information from the environment. Senses are the powers which help humans and animals to gather different kinds of information from the outside world or within ourselves. This is done through sensory organs (e.g. nose, eyes, ears, etc.) which means senses are connected to our bodies. Plants too receive stimuli from the environment (e.g. the flower being directed towards sunlight) but it is hard to say that they sense it, i.e. that they perceive the stimulus when being exposed to it. The third is the already mentioned power to move from one place to another.

Power to feel emotions is connected to the power to use the senses, both internal and external ones. After gathering information through the senses, animals and humans can experience reactions to the things that affect them through emotions. For example, an animal can see a predator approaching which can trigger the emotion of fear. A human person can hear someone making fun of him or her, and feel the emotion of sadness. On the other hand, when plants receive stimuli from the environment, they do not experience it emotionally. If someone cuts a tree, the tree does not feel pain.

Finally, humans alone have the power to think and choose. Plants and animals do not share this power. Animals, and especially higher animals like chimpanzees, do have some form of cognition and decision-making. However, this is always strictly connected to the basic survival instincts. For example, an animal can learn how to escape different mazes or use tools in order to reach food. A dog can learn how to respond to basic commands such as “sit”, “stay”, “go”. However, these are not, strictly speaking, the powers to think and choose. Humans are not just able to use more complex tools to reach food, but they can also decide to temporarily give up on food to pursue higher goals. Humans alone can think about complex concepts, such as solving a math problem, making new inventions, inventing jokes, or creatively expressing themselves through art. Humans are also fundamentally free from their environment. Whenever an animal is exposed to the same stimulus from the environment for a prolonged period of time, it will develop the same response to this stimulus (e.g. when exposed to pain, it will run away or attack back). But humans can freely decide how to respond to stimuli. For example, when someone hits us, we can decide neither to flee nor to fight back, but to forgive the person and try to reconcile with them.

Highlight once more that the powers to think and to choose are specifically human powers and write the definitions of those powers on the board:

Power to Think: the human ability to know and connect ideas about oneself, others, and the world
Power to Choose: the human ability to knowingly select between options

Step 5: To reinforce the idea that humans are fundamentally different from other living beings, show the [video](#) What distinguishes humans from other animals? by Ken Miller and invite students to share their comments.

Then, ask the students for examples of the situations in which we use human powers most visibly. Students will likely come up with different examples, but make sure to highlight the following:

Science
Technology
Education
Arts and creativity
Morality
Important life decisions

Lead the class discussion to show how only humans can do these things, such as going to space, painting the Mona Lisa, choosing between right and wrong actions, etc.

Step 6: Summarize. Today's lesson focused on the three powers which all living beings share (eat, grow, reproduce), three which only humans and animals share (move, use senses, feel emotions) and two which distinguish humans from all other beings: powers to think and choose. The class mentioned some examples of where these powers are most explicitly used. The most important thing distinguishing humans from other creatures is their special value, human dignity. The lesson defined three characteristics of human dignity: that it is universal, intrinsic and inalienable.

HIERARCHY OF BEING TABLE

In the left column write:

- 3 powers all living beings share
- 3 which only animals and humans share
- 2 which only humans have

Power: ability of a living thing to do something on its own

	Plants	Animals	Humans
POWERS			
	x	x	x
	x	x	x
	x	x	x
		x	x
		x	x
		x	x
			x
			x

Note: be ready to explain what each power entails.