

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.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Subjects and Objects Table
- Subject-Object Case Studies + Answer Key

VOCABULARY

- Human dignity: the special value of every human person
- Universal: every person has dignity
- Intrinsic: dignity is within us, we have it just by being human
- Inalienable: dignity cannot be given to us or taken away from us
- 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.

Highlight that the students learned about the special value that distinguishes humans from all other living and non-living beings: human dignity. Highlight that human dignity has three characteristics: it is universal, intrinsic and inalienable, and recall the vocabulary definition of these three characteristics.

Step 2: Introduce the subject-object distinction. Print out the Subjects and Objects Table at the end of the lesson, and cut the page into squares so that each example is on its own piece of paper (20 individual examples). Place the pieces of paper in a basket for the students to draw from. On the board in front of the classroom, draw a table on the board like the one below.

Subjects	Objects

Ask a volunteer to choose a piece of paper from the basket, and read the example aloud to the class. After the volunteer reads the term aloud, ask the whole class one of the following questions with regard to the term that was read:

For example: Can this (e.g. a car) be given away when it is no longer useful to us? [Object: YES]

- Should we respect this? [Subject: YES, Object: NO]
- Can this be bought or sold? [Subject: NO, Object: YES]
- Can we manipulate it for our own interest? [Subject: NO, Object: YES]
- Should we care how it feels? [Subject: YES, Object: NO]
- Can we own it? [Subject: NO, Object: YES]
- Can we love, or only like it? [Subject: YES, Object: NO]
- Should we ask its opinion before we decide what to do with it? [Subject: YES, Object: NO]
- Should we feel empathy towards it? [Subject: YES, Object: NO]
- Can we throw it away when it becomes damaged? [Subject: NO, Object: YES]
- Can we be friends with it? [Subject: YES, Object: NO]
- Can we do whatever we want with it? [Subject: NO, Object: YES]

Depending on which answer was given for each of the terms (e.g. whether it is a subject or an object), write each term into the corresponding column in the table. The completed table should look like this:

Subjects	Objects
Firefighter A parent Person in a coma Old person Severely sick infant Person with a disability Person who is homeless My best friend Classmate I dislike Person of another race than me	Computer Notebook My phone Book Old shirt Bed Potted plant Banana Lunch box Sandwich

Step 3: Explain that there is an important difference between how we should treat subjects (such as older persons, friends and classmates) and objects (like a phone, book or sandwich). We can use objects as we please. We can own them, buy them, sell them, use them for our own interest, or give them away when they are no longer useful to us.

But with subjects, it is different. Subjects should be respected for their human dignity, not for their use or benefit to us. When they are sick or old, we should care for them. When we want to do something that will affect them, we should ask their opinion about it. When they are hurt or sad, we also feel sad with them or ask if we can help. (This is unique to subjects rather than objects--we would not feel sad for an object such as a sandwich, while we eat it.)

We can love and have true friendship with subjects, while the most we can do with objects is like or appreciate them. It is possible for us to really like a new shirt or bicycle, but we can only truly love someone who is a subject, such as a parent, sibling or a friend.

It is important to recognize that because persons have dignity, they should always be treated as subjects, and never merely as objects. Persons have an intrinsic worth and should never be valued simply for their usefulness or for the enjoyment they bring us. Whenever people are treated as objects, that treatment is a violation of 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

When we treat other people like 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 simply to get what we want, rather than caring about their well-being, we are treating them like we treat tools, such as cell phones and hammers. This way of treating human beings goes against their dignity.

Step 4: Read the three [Subject-Object Case Studies](#) aloud to the class. In each case, the students should be able to identify who was treated as an object and identify how they would better handle the situation. Discuss the case studies together, helping the students to properly evaluate each case using the [Subject-Object Case Study Teacher Answer Key](#). After the class discussion, divide students into three groups and assign each group one of the three case studies. Have each group prepare a skit to act out the scenario in the case study and what they would do to improve the situation and treat every person as a subject.

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.

SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS TABLE

Computer	Firefighter	A parent	Notebook
Person in a coma	My Phone	Old person	Book
Old shirt	Severely sick infant	Bed	Person with a disability
Potted plant	Banana	Person who is homeless	My best friend
Lunch box	Classmate I dislike	Sandwich	Person of another race than me

SUBJECT-OBJECT CASE STUDIES

Case study 1

Benjamin is a new kid in the school. He is a good student but since he doesn't really know anyone, he is quiet in class. His teachers assume that it might take some time for him to adjust to his new environment and so in order to make him feel comfortable they try to give him more attention. Because of this, some of his classmates have noticed this and call him a teacher's pet. In one English class, the students were told to deliver a speech in front of everyone. When it was Benjamin's turn, he was so nervous that he mispronounced a lot of the words. One of his classmates, Oliver, started making fun of the way he speaks. All of Oliver's friends started laughing and eventually the whole class was giggling at Benjamin.

The teacher told Oliver to stop, but outside of the classroom, whenever the teacher wasn't around, Oliver would make little comments about Benjamin to get other people to laugh. As a result, Benjamin avoids conversations with his classmates and hasn't made any new friends at school.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

- In this story, was Benjamin treated as a subject or object?
- When Oliver and his friends were making fun of Benjamin, what would you have done?
- If you were Benjamin, how would you handle the situation? Would you do anything differently?

Case study 2

Kiara is one of the popular students in the school and she has a lot of friends. Nadine would love to have as many friends as Kiara but she has a harder time fitting in. A lot of the girls in her class go to Kiara's home after school to hang out, whereas Nadine goes home and her Mom usually makes sure she does her homework before taking her to swimming or dance lessons.

The other day in math class Kiara asked Nadine if she wanted to help her with her math homework since Nadine is known to be really good at math. Nadine was happy that Kiara had asked her and immediately tried to help Kiara with her homework. Kiara even said that they should hang out some time.

But during the lunch break – Nadine went to sit with Kiara and her friends and Kiara ignored her and eventually left the table before Nadine was finished eating her lunch.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

- Who was treated as an object in this situation, and why?
- If you were Nadine –how would you feel?
- If you were Kiara–what would you do differently, and why?

Case study 3:

John, Jake and Chris were at the playground after school. Chris is Jake's younger brother so he is not yet as tall as the other two boys.

John and Jake decided to play basketball and invited Chris to play. During the game, John and Jake never passed the ball to Chris. But, anytime the ball went out of the playground, they told Chris to go get it and bring it back to the game.

Chris was hoping that if he went to get the ball, they would appreciate this and include him and pass to him in the game. But they still didn't pass to him - even though they had invited him to play!

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

- Who was treated as an object in this situation and why?
- If you were Chris, what would make you feel better in this situation?
- What would you do if you were John or Jake?

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

1. In this situation, Benjamin was treated as an object. The other students did not treat him with respect and care, but rather, used him as an object of mockery with no thought for his feelings. They could have done this out of insecurity or jealousy due to the special attention Benjamin received or because they saw him as a threat instead of a fellow student who is nervous and shy. Oliver and his friends used Benjamin. They made fun of his nervous speech in order to get laughs and attention for themselves from their classmates. They treated him without respect and care.
2. Instead of silently watching Oliver and his friends make fun of Benjamin, I would have reached out to him in friendship. Since he is shy and nervous, and probably hurt by the actions of the other boys in the class, reaching out in friendship would mean a lot to him and help him to feel accepted and cared for. I would try to understand how Benjamin thinks and feels and accompany him to lunch or on the playground. If the situation became worse, I would reach out to a teacher for help.
3. If I were Benjamin, I would remind myself that I have intrinsic human dignity and immeasurable value, even if other people do not always recognize that. I would see this as an opportunity to grow in self-confidence and connection with others, by reaching out to other friends, parents, and teachers for help.

Case study 2:

1. In this situation, Nadine was treated as an object because Kiara used her just for the purpose of helping her with her homework and after that she ignored her.
2. If I were Nadine, I would feel sad, embarrassed, disappointed, and betrayed.
3. If I were Kiara, I would understand that Nadine is a human being with the same worth as me (same dignity) and I would respect her for who she is and not for what she can give to me (how she can help me). I would also try to show her that I respect her dignity and admire her kindness for helping me with math. I would introduce her to my friends and make a new friend.

Case study 3:

1. In this situation, Chris was treated as an object because he was invited to the game simply because the others thought he would be useful. They wanted him to chase the ball when it went outside of the playground, rather than play as a teammate.
2. If I were Chris, I would feel better if my older brother Jake and his friend John respected my presence and tried to include me. Even though I am younger and shorter than them, I want to practice and can do more than just fetch the ball.
3. If I were John or Jake, I would include Chris in the game. I wouldn't use him as a person to go fetch the ball, but we could all take turns going to get the ball when it goes out of bounds. I would respect him and pass to him so that he could also become a better player, which would improve my game, too.