



LESSON PLAN: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

OVERVIEW: Students consider the extent to which name-calling is a part of their lives and the damage that can be done by the names they use so casually. They are asked to complete written reflections about their experiences with name-calling and to read articles about the history and usage of common slurs. Students are challenged to rethink their own behavior and to consider ways to reduce name-calling in their communities.

OBJECTIVES:

- Students will be able to describe impact of names and slurs in their lives
- Students will be able to provide a reflection on their own experiences with name-calling
- Students will be able to explain the derivation and usage of common slurs
- Students will brainstorm strategies they can use to reduce name-calling in their communities

AGE/EXPERIENCE LEVEL: Grades 9-12; this activity involves sensitive language and subject matter

TIME: At least 70 minutes or two class periods

MATERIALS: Chart paper/markers; pens; Student handouts: *Commonly Used Slurs*

PROCEDURE:

PART 1—INTRODUCING THE ACTIVITY (10-15 MINUTES)

Tell students that the Iñupiat peoples of Northern Alaska have at least eleven words for snow. You can put the following list on the board or read some of them aloud.

nutagaq: new fresh powder snow
qigsruqaq: glazed snow in thaw time
sitliq: hard crusty snow auksalaq: melting snow
aniu: packed snow
aniuvaq: snow bank natigvik: snow drift
qimaugruk: snow drift blocking a trail or a building
aqiluqqaq: soft snow milik: very soft snow
mitailaq: soft snow on ice floe covering an open spot

Emphasize that the fact that there are so many ways to describe one thing in the Iñupiat language gives us a sense of the importance of snow conditions in their lives.

Note that in English (and most other languages), there are countless putdowns or words that describe others in hurtful ways. Ask students to take one minute to think of all the putdowns they hear on a daily basis. They should not say them aloud, just list them in their minds. After a minute of silent reflection, ask students how many they came up with—Ten? Twenty? More? Point out that the fact that there are so many tells us that putting others down is an all too common part of our lives. Ask students why they think that name-calling is such a regular and often accepted part of the way that young people relate to one another.

PART 2—REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCES WITH NAME-CALLING (25-30 MINUTES)

Ask students to take some time to reflect on their experiences with name-calling and to write a paragraph expressing their thoughts. One or more of the following questions can be used to guide their writing:

- What are the most common types of slurs or names that you hear on a regular basis?
- Who gets called names in your school? Under what circumstances? (*Don't name specific people; just describe what type of people are targeted.*)
- Have you ever used a slur or called someone an insulting name? What made you use those words?
- Has a slur or insulting name ever been used against you? Did you know why people chose to use those names to describe you? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?

When students are finished writing, ask for a few volunteers to read their reflections aloud and to receive feedback from the group.

PART 3— THE POWER OF NAMES (TIMES WILL VARY)

Say the following phrases aloud to the class: "*Don't be such a faggot.*" "*You're such a retard.*" Ask students if these words sound familiar? Ask them if the old adage, "names will never harm you," is true. Are insults like these used so generally and frequently that they have become meaningless, or do such names have the power to harm us? After some discussion, make sure to emphasize that names *do* hurt. They shame and dehumanize people, spread prejudice, and prop up social ladders on which only some people get to be at the top. Give some version of the following talk in order to set up the next part of the activity:

"Names are used recklessly in our lives. This means that they are tossed around without much



thought about what they really mean or how much they hurt others. They may be used as so-called jokes, to get back at others, to go along with the crowd, and because of prejudice and fear of differences. But the names we carelessly toss around are often rooted in cruelty and have long histories of hate. Perhaps if we better understood how these names came to be and how they affect other people, we might think twice before using them?"

During the next part of the activity, students are asked to read brief articles about the history and usage of common slurs and to reflect on the power these words hold to hurt others (see the handouts, *Commonly Used Slurs*). The words *faggot*, *retard*, *nigger*, and *bitch* were selected for this lesson due to the frequency and thoughtlessness with which so many young people use them. Because these words are so provocative, teachers are cautioned to use these articles only if their students can discuss them responsibly. The articles may be used in one or more of the following ways, which are listed in sequence from more to less structured/moderated experiences:

- Read one article together as a class and pose one or more of the questions below to process the reading. Collect the articles after the activity so that they will not be used inappropriately out- side of class. Repeat this process with the other articles on subsequent days or as time allows.
- Have students read one of the articles to themselves. Ask them to respond to one or more of the questions below either in writing or through discussion with a partner. Bring the whole class together and ask for volunteers to share some of their reactions. Repeat this process with the other articles on subsequent days or as time allows.
- Divide the class into small groups of 4-6 students and distribute a different article to each group. Ask each group to read the article and discuss the questions below. Bring the whole class together and ask each group to present a summary of their reading and the key ideas that emerged during their discussions.
- Ask students to read the article that reflects language about which they are most concerned. Individually or in groups of students who have chosen the same article, have them do further research about the history and usage of the slur they have selected and/or other slurs. Students can then present what they have learned to the larger class.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What was the most surprising thing you learned from the article(s) you read?
2. Now that you know more about the history and usage of these words, will you continue to use them? Why or why not?
3. Are there circumstances under which it's acceptable to use these words? Why or why not?
4. What are some of the other slurs commonly used by people in your school and community? What do you think they mean, and why do you think people use them?
5. What can you do to educate others about the meaning of slurs and reduce name-calling?



WHAT'S IN A NAME: FAGGOT

Many people are aware that the word "faggot" - like the French *fagot* and Italian *fa(n)gotto* - refers to a bunch of sticks, herbs, or metal rods tied together into a bundle, but what's the connection between a bundle of sticks and a modern-day insult?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "faggot" has been used in a wide variety of

ways since the 1300s. At first it was a neutral term, simply referring to a bundle of sticks or twigs that someone might gather for fuel. Eventually, however, it took on several different negative meanings. When heretics—people who opposed the teachings of the Catholic Church—were burned alive during the European Inquisitions, the fires used to burn them were built with a "faggot." The expression "to fry a faggot" came to mean "to be burnt alive." Heretics often were forced to carry the "faggot" to the fire being built for them, and those who took back their anti-Catholic beliefs to avoid execution were forced to wear the design of a faggot embroidered on their sleeve, to identify them as former heretics. "Faggot" therefore also came to mean something difficult to bear. This particular meaning grew as a sexist insult, often directed at women considered to be bad-tempered, tiresome, or not respectable.

The word "faggot" was later used during the 19th to 20th century in British all-male boarding schools. Younger students were expected to gather bundles of sticks to fuel the fireplaces in older students' rooms. This practice was extended to include all sorts of tasks older students could demand of younger students. Being someone's "faggot" came to mean having a submissive position.

"Faggot" first appeared in the U.S. during the early part of the 20th century as a slang term for men considered to be woman-like or flashy. The term grew more common and more hateful during the middle of the century, and by the 1960s had become one of the most common slurs used against gay men, or men perceived to be gay. It is unclear exactly when "faggot" came to be embraced as an all-purpose insult, but that usage no doubt comes from the belief among some straight men that the greatest possible humiliation is to be identified as gay.

Other definitions for the noun "faggot" throughout history have included a type of meat pastry produced in the U.K.; a person temporarily employed to fill a shortage in a company or military regiment's ranks; a type of vote in the British Parliament; and thinly sliced pieces or frayed edges. "Fag" is British slang for a cigarette. The verb form of "faggot" meant to tie or bind up as in a "faggot" of sticks, but also was used to refer to fastening objects, ideas or people together. A rare use of the verb form of "faggot" referred to the act of setting the accused heretic on the fire for burning. "To faggot" also came to mean "to recant" or take back one's statements, referring to the "faggot" design former heretics were forced to display on their clothing.

There have been many debates about the relationship of the definitions described above to anti-

gay harassment in today's world. Some people believe that current usage of the term "faggot" comes specifically from the history of burning heretics, suggesting that gay people or people

perceived to be gay were included in the condemned. Others believe that the current usage of the term "faggot" comes from the history of abusing women, especially women considered less desirable. Either way, it is clear that "faggot" is the product of a long history of violence and sexism, and carries the pain of that history even when used as a general insult.



WHAT'S IN A NAME: RETARD

I was recently riding my skateboard one evening, trying to keep my mind off the scorching summer heat, when I was attacked by a group of teenagers. These misguided youths didn't have guns or knives or tight-clenched fists, but rather razor sharp insults. "Hey retard, you look retarded riding on that thing!," they yelled. I am not diagnosed with a developmental disability, but the comment still bothered me. I began to wonder how many other people in our community have suffered this same insult, disabled or not. What does it mean, I wondered, to be called "retarded"? Why is this word so insulting?

To answer these questions we must first examine the origin of the word. The original Latin is *retardare*, meaning "to delay," taken from the root word *tardus*, meaning "slow." When used as a verb, *retard* means "a slowing down or hindering of progress." In music the term refers to a "slacking of tempo." As an adjective the term implies "slow in mental, emotional or physical development." As far as the U.S. health system is concerned, the term *mental retardation* refers to "below average intelligence that is less than an IQ of 70, is present from birth or infancy, and may be accompanied by abnormal development, learning difficulties, and problems in social adjustment." The dictionary also notes that, in common slang, when one calls another person a retard, it is often offensive in meaning.

Most of us probably think of the word *retarded* in terms of a mental disability. Unfortunately many people believe that all people with disabilities are "retarded." They don't know that it refers to a specific diagnosis used by doctors and psychiatrists. The term was never meant to apply to all people with disabilities. Many people with developmental and physical disabilities have an above average IQ. Some are even geniuses. The term was certainly never meant to be used as a slur.

I don't have a diagnosed disability, but I know people who do and are better at algebra than I am. Others I know with disabilities are gifted artists, musicians, computer operators, and statisticians. As we learn more about the human mind and brain function, we realize that intelligence can't be reduced to a number. There are many ways in which a person can be intelligent. Psychiatrist Howard Gardner has suggested that there are actually seven forms of intelligence. Most of us are familiar with the verbal and mathematical forms, but others include kinesthetic (dance and rhythm), spatial (art), musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (the ability to understand oneself). We need to embrace each other's individual gifts instead of focusing on limitations.

A coach was recently overheard yelling at his athletes, "You guys play like a bunch of retards!" I wonder what he meant by that? When used in the wrong context, it simply implies a lack of awareness or sensitivity to the issues people with disabilities face. When used derogatively, the word becomes malicious; a dirty word born of the same ignorance that spawns racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual slurs. The use of the term in this manner cannot be tolerated in a society that believes that all people are equal.



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As I reflect upon the evening that I was called a retard, I can't help but think that the world has got it all backwards. If retarded means "a slowing down or hindering of progress," I think that the bullies who are taunting me (and others) fit this description better than anyone I know with a disability. As most of us seek to realize our own potential as human beings, those who choose to belittle others, cut people down, and purposely hurt those who are in some way different are themselves really the ones who are experiencing a slow-down or a hindering of progress. Meanwhile the rest of us are busy sprouting root and stretching our wings, eager to continue growing.

This essay adapted from The Day I was Called a Retard by Tyler Osterhaus, at <http://www.oshkoshsupport-group.homestead.com/thoughts2.html>, and reprinted with permission.



WHAT'S IN A NAME: NIGGER

About a year ago, one of my friends asked me if it was cool if she called me her "nigga." "No," I replied with disgust, hoping the conversation wouldn't continue. My friend, who says she is Armenian, Lebanese, and white, justified her question because she has a black relative. I knew my friend wouldn't say the word as an insult or in disdain, but I still didn't approve of her referring to me as her "nigga." I understood that her interpretation of the word was intended as a term of endearment — comrade, homie, my sister — those were her true intentions. So why did her question bother me? Did I take her comments too literally?

The word nigger is actually derived from the Latin word for the color black, niger. It wasn't until 1837, that Hosea Easton, a famous author, established that the term was "employed to impose contempt upon [blacks] as an inferior race ..." The N-word has its roots as a derogatory term and has been used throughout history as a hurtful epithet. Nigger is a term rooted in hatred, used to belittle blacks and degrade African American culture. Nigger still inflicts pain and is still an insult when applied to people of all kinds of oppressed heritages.

People sometimes forget "Niggers of Europe" and "Niggers of the Middle East" were used to refer to people of Irish and Middle Eastern descent by Anglo American supremacists. Such labels were meant to demean people from those cultures, invoking nothing but hatred and ignorance. A few months ago, I read a story about poor whites who are increasingly referring to one another as "niggers" or "white nigga trash" to inflict the lowest of insults on each other.

Unfortunately, in modern society, young people have abused and exploited the word. The reality is that blacks shouldn't use it when addressing their black friends with ease in the presence of people from other backgrounds. It transforms the word into a friendly name, and others can then rationalize using the term casually.

After Jennifer Lopez recorded her hit, I'm Real, the African American community was outraged about Lopez's use of the word nigger in her song. In the midst of the quarrel with Ms. Lopez, it seems the black community suddenly forgot about all the black artists who use the word like it's the time of day. If the public is going to criticize Ms. Lopez for her use, they should also lament the many black entertainers — particularly rappers — who insert it into their music.

Back in the 70s, comedian Richard Pryor produced an album called That Nigger's Crazy. Today, the popular comedian Chris Rock opens one of his best-known skits with, "I love black people, but I hate niggers." Both of these black comedians have been subject to criticism for playing on the N- word in their skits, yet they receive only a fraction of the criticism that whites receive when using the term in public.

Democratic Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia (a former Ku Klux Klan member) made a remark in March 2001 and got into trouble for saying that "he had seen a lot of white niggers in

[his] time." His comment raised eyebrows, and nearly destroyed his public reputation. Why did the public react differently?

Too many young people believe derogatory terms have different meanings depending on who's saying them. But even if someone is degrading his or her own ethnic group, the use of any derogatory term is hurtful. When someone who has been called a nigger in the past uses the word in reference to themselves and others, they seem to think it is empowering. Teens feel that giving the term a new meaning will enable them to use it without invoking its old derogatory meaning, but it doesn't.

In a similar way, gays and lesbians have reclaimed terms like "queer" and "fag," and women have referred

to their female counterparts as "bitches" and "hos." How can degrading oneself really be empowering? How can it be a display of one's solidarity with others of the same gender, racial or sexual status?

In my opinion, nigger and other derogatory terms have no place in American society or in the entertainment business. All people, regardless of their race, should avoid using "nigger," especially when it is unnecessary. It is hateful, shameful and a disgrace to all when used unintelligently.

But is there an intelligent way to use it? Randall Kennedy, a professor at Harvard University Law School, has a lot to say about that. His book, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, documents many court cases involving the term, including the controversies surrounding the use of the word in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a required book in many high school English classes. While ignorant use of the word is hurtful, destructive and racist, it does have a place in our history and culture and should not be censored when used for academic purposes.

This essay is adapted from Mis-Education About the N-Word by Candace Coleman, a student at Marymount High School in Los Angeles. This essay originally appeared on Wiretap and is reprinted



WHAT'S IN A NAME: BITCH

The word *bitch* dates from about the year 1000 in the Old English written record, and originally referred to "the female of the dog, fox, wolf, and occasionally of other beasts." A *bitch* is also a primitive form of lamp used in Alaska and Canada. However, the most common use of the word today is as a description of women considered aggressive or malicious, or as a verb to mean complaining or grumbling.

Bitch was used as a slur against women as early as 1400 and was not uncommon in the literature of the time. It was originally employed to describe ill-mannered or sexually "loose" women by comparing them to female dogs, which bear pups rather frequently. By the 19th century, *bitch* had evolved into a reference to women considered malicious or treacherous. Today the term is used so commonly that it is shrugged off as harmless by many, who have been numbed to its sexist and demeaning origins. In the 1990s, Hip Hop artist Queen Latifah wrote a song called *UNITY* expressing her anger with the use of the word *bitch*:

Instinct leads me to another flow,
Every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho,
Trying to make a sister feel low, You know all of that gots to go,
Now every body knows there's exceptions to this rule,
Now don't be getting mad, when we playing, it's cool
But don't you be calling out my name
I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame.

While *UNITY* challenged sexist language and sexual harassment, the past decade has seen the rise of the word *bitch* as an acceptable way to describe women in some communities. Women who are strong, independent, and self-sufficient may refer to themselves as *bitches* in a positive way that takes back power from those who have used the word against them, as in the song *She's A Bitch* by Hip Hop artist Missy Elliot:

She is a bitch,
When you say my name,
Talk mo' junk but won't look my way,
She's a bitch,
See I got more cheese,
So back on up while I roll up my sleeves,

There has been much debate about whether or not it is acceptable to reclaim or take back slurs and turn them into empowering terms. Whatever your opinion, there is no denying the origins of *bitch* as a term that degrades women, and there is no excuse for using the word casually or in ways that encourage sexism or violence against women.

The article, Bitch, by Sharine Newby was used as a resource for this piece.