

THE POWER OF WORDS

LESSON 6 INTENTION AND PERCEPTION

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TEACHING GOAL

Students will develop awareness about the ways intention, perception and the use of stereotype-laden language can affect communication.

LEARNING ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Students will perform and analyze a script in which the use of stereotypes in language contributes to miscommunication.

TERMS/CONCEPTS ADDRESSED

- Pejorative terms, including FemiNazi, PC Police, redneck
- Neutral terms used as pejorative, including gay, liberal, PC, radical
- Social justice terms, including oppression, discrimination, homophobia
- Words related to language or communication, including stereotype, intention, perception, communication, denotation, connotation

FemiNazi A pejorative blend of feminist and Nazi, stigmatizing almost any feminist or liberal female activist. ... [These slurs], thought to be jocular by some people, are not likely to be used outside politically far right discourse and have been on the wane even there.

Homophobia A reference to a conscious or unconscious aversion to and fear of homosexual – also bisexual or transgendered – people, homosexuality and homosexual communities and culture.

PC/politically correct/political correctness A term that became popular on American university campuses around 1990, used for a set of ideas, concerns, principles and directives that stresses social nonoppressiveness, inclusiveness and sensitivity to diverse groups of people. ...The terms political correctness and politically correct have been surrounded by a great deal of critical rhetoric and attempts to explain, mock and discredit them.

(For more, see *Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation Bias in the United States* and *The Color of Words: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States*.)

TYPE OF LEARNING ACTIVITY

Skit/drama • Assigned listening • Experiential learning

MATERIALS NEEDED

- This lesson plan
- Copies of Listening Prompts Handout, one for each student
- Two copies of the script page, one for each actor
- Adequate space for the actors to move around

TIME RANGE

- 5 minutes to perform the skit
- 10 to 20 minutes for assigned listeners to report
- 10 to 30 minutes for discussion

GROUP SIZE

Small to large (two students assigned as skit actors; remaining students divided into six listening groups)

LEARNING ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

1. Select two students to serve as actors.
2. Assign students to listening groups, and ask each group to listen for one of the following:
 - Stereotypes;
 - Intentions of each speaker;
 - Perceptions of each listener;
 - Denotation (factual meanings of words);
 - Connotation (implied or associated meanings of words); or
 - Effects of pejorative language on each of the actors.
3. The actors perform the provided skit.
4. Each assigned listening group reports on what they heard (from both actors).
5. Individually or in groups, rewrite the skit, making suggestions for ways to have the same conversation without the pejorative terms.

DEBRIEF

Discuss the following questions in small groups, or as a class:

- Which words were openly pejorative? Which words were neutral but used as pejoratives?

- How did the use of stereotypes contribute to miscommunication between the actors?
- How can miscommunication occur even when both speakers have good intentions?
- Did the use of any of the terms make you uncomfortable? If so, which ones? Why?
- Did this exercise give you any new ideas? If so, what are they?
- Will you change any of your language or behaviors as a result of this exercise? If so, which ones? Why?

The Power of Words curriculum is based on cultural anthropologist Philip Herbst's ground-breaking dictionaries, *The Color of Words: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States* (ISBN# 1-877864-97-8, \$29.95) and *Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation Bias in the United States* (ISBN# 1-877864-80-3, \$44.95). Both are available from:

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P.O. Box 700
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Toll free: 866-372-2665
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(Actors laughing at something.)

David: “Oh, man, that is so gay.”

Maria: “Wait a minute – I can’t believe you said that.”

David: “Why, what’s wrong with that?”

Maria: “It’s homophobic, that’s what.”

David: “Oh, please; don’t go all PC on me.”

Maria: “Well, don’t go ignorant redneck on me.”

David: “Oh, so if I don’t agree with your liberal rhetoric, I’m a redneck?”

Maria: “Well, duh! It’s so obvious – are you insecure in your sexuality or something?”

David: “Oh, come on! It doesn’t mean *that* – it just means lame. Everybody knows that.”

Maria: “Now you’re being ableist.”

David: “Good grief! What are you – some kind of FemiNazi? You’re like the PC police!”

Maria: “And you are such a retard.”

David: “Yeah, well, who’s being ‘ableist’ now?”

Maria: “Oh, stop it. You know, I am really amazed at your homophobia.”

David: “Look, I’m not homophobic. I knew this guy Paul, and he was totally gay, and he was a really nice guy. I didn’t hold anything against him.”

Maria: “How nice of you to forgive him.”

David: “You’re just being too sensitive. Don’t I have a right to my opinion?”

Maria: “Not when it oppresses other people.”

David: “That’s reverse discrimination. You’re oppressing me right now.”

Maria: “Oh, please; that’s not what ‘oppression’ means.”

David: “Look, I didn’t mean anything by it. Can’t you take a joke?”

Maria: “Dork.”

David: “Radical.”

Maria: “OK, let’s just forget it . . . What were we talking about before all this came up?”

David: “I don’t know. Something about our assignment for Women’s History Month.”

Name _____

I am in the (check one):

- “Stereotypes” Listening Group
- “Intentions of Each Speaker” Listening Group
- “Perceptions of Each Listener” Listening Group
- “Denotation” Listening Group
- “Connotation” Listening Group
- “Effects of Pejorative Language” Listening Group

What I heard: