

English Language Arts 7: Street Language

Aim/Rationale

Cycle 1: Students will determine the meanings and etymology of many different street terms regarding sexual orientation, women, and sexual activities. They will apply critical thought to determine how these terms influence and encourage sexual stereotypes.

Cycle 2: Students will determine the meanings and etymology of many different street terms regarding sexual orientation, women, and sexual activities. They will apply critical thought to determine how these terms influence and encourage sexual stereotypes, and will devise awareness campaigns that deconstruct derogatory words and phrases.

Trigger Warning

Derogatory and discriminatory language

Cycle 1 Competencies

- 1) *Uses language/talk to communicate and to learn*
- 2) *Represents their literacy in different media*
- 3) *Reads and listens to written, spoken and media texts*
- 4) *Writes a variety of genres for personal and social purposes*

Cycle 2 Competencies

- 1) *Uses language/talk to communicate and to learn*
- 2) *Reads and listens to written, spoken and media texts*
- 3) *Produces texts for personal and social purposes*

Lesson

Materials

A computer, a projector, large pieces of craft paper, markers

www.dictionary.com -online dictionary website

www.etymonline.com -online etymology website

www.urbandictionary.com -online dictionary of street language and urban slang

Hook [15 min]

Cycle 1 and Cycle 2

Four Corners Activity

Divide the four corners of the room into four different “street language” categories (Sexual Orientation, Women, Sexual Activities, Men).

Divide the class equally into four groups and assign each group a corner.

Instruct students to brainstorm all of the slang words, and insults they have heard related to their category.

Discussion Questions

Were there some categories that were easier than others? Or that appear to have more words and insults than others? Why?

What words appear in multiple categories? Why?

What words do students hear most often at their school?

Questions for more mature groups (Cycle 2):

What patterns do you notice about slang words and insults directed towards women, and those directed towards men? (*Insults directed towards men often deal with sexual orientation and masculinity whereas insults directed towards women often portray society’s expectations regarding women’s sexual behaviour. Furthermore, most insults directed towards men allude to femininity and are therefore indirectly insulting women.*)

What do all the slang words and insults have in common? (*They demean the minority groups in society*)

*Before the start of the activity the teacher should be clear that many of these words are demeaning and discriminatory and should not be used in the classroom otherwise, but students may use them within the context of the brainstorm and lesson plan to learn and teach other students.

Teachers: Don’t be afraid to tell students if you are uncomfortable with this kind of language. Refer to sexedtoolkit.com for how to deal with sensitive material.

Development/Teaching Methods [40-50min]

Cycle 1 Learning Activity

1. Online Activity (10 min)

Have students look up the word “fag” at www.dictionary.com or some other online dictionary reference. They may find that the word used to mean a bundle of twigs or that it is British slang for a cigarette. Today “fag” is used in a derogatory way to refer to someone (usually male) with a homosexual orientation. When someone calls another a fag, they are likely trying to make them feel badly by insulting their perceived orientation or lack of masculinity.

(It is also worth mentioning that sexual orientation and gender are not one in the same. A man with a homosexual orientation is not necessarily more feminine than another with a heterosexual orientation.)

Repeat the process with a couple more of the words from the brainstorm activity.

2. “How Violent?” Activity (30 min)

Additional materials required: 2 pieces of large craft paper with the words “Very Violent”, “Violent”, “Harsh”, and “Peaceful” written on them. Each piece of paper is a separate continuum with “Very Violent” written at the top and “Peaceful” written at the bottom.

(10-15 min)

Post each Violence Continuum in two different locations of the classroom. Divide the students into two groups and assign each group to a Violence Continuum. Each group will be given two craft papers from the “street language” brainstorm and asked to assign each slang word or insult to a place on the Violence Continuum. Try to distribute the “street language” brainstorm papers so that each group is working on some of the same words. Each group must come to a consensus about each word’s placement on their particular continuum.

Be sure to explain to students that the violence continuum does not represent physical violence but rather the gravity of the slang words or insults; in other words, how hurtful each word is. For example, a word that is placed near the top of the continuum next to “Very Violent” illustrates that the word is very hurtful for some people or may even promote significant oppression such as sexism or homophobia, whereas a word put next to “Peaceful” conveys that the word is harmless and doesn’t really bother anybody.

(15-20 min)

Lead a discussion comparing the two Violence Continuums. Some questions to consider could include:

I. Was it difficult for your group to come to a consensus for certain words? Why? *(Students usually have different interpretations of the severity of a word based on their own personal experiences and violence tolerance. Students may also have misunderstandings of certain words based on where they heard the word first.)*

II. Can your group explain why the word (blank) is in the (blank) category? Ask each group to explain their reasoning behind a few words.

III. Do you notice any particular trends for words near either end of the continuum? *(For example, students may think that words insulting women are very discriminatory whereas words such as “fag”, that insult sexual orientation, are quite harmless. Students should reflect on whether this makes sense or not. Just because a word is used more frequently does not make it less harmful.)*

IV. Is one group’s continuum more correct than the other? You can choose one or two words that were put at different places to illustrate this point. *(No, everyone has different perspectives, different tolerance levels, and different identities, and we must take all of this into account when we are using certain language. However it might be important to point out that very rarely are these kinds of words appropriately placed in the “Peaceful” category.)*

V. What was the purpose of this activity?

VI. Why is perspective and point of view so important when we are talking about slang words and street language? *(We must be aware that what we say can greatly impact those around us, and be sensitive about using language that people interpret as discriminatory or oppressive even if we do not think that it is.)*

Adaptations for Cycle 2

1. Online Activity (see Cycle 1 above)

2. Awareness Campaigns (40 min)

In groups of 3-4, have students choose a word from the brainstorm activity, and one that they hear frequently at school, to pitch a possible awareness campaign with the goal of sensitizing the student body to the harmful use of this word.

Provide students with guidelines for their awareness campaigns such as:

Target audience (Is the campaign aimed at a certain grade level?)

Medium (Are students creating posters, a blog, a flash mob, or even filming a short video?)

Budget (Is there a budget being given to the students? How could they fundraise for their campaign?)

Campaign Goal (Is there a specific behavior change students would like to observe? How could they measure this?)

Allow students 25 minutes to brainstorm and come up with a pitch and use the remaining 15 minutes for each group to present their campaign idea in a 1-2 minute pitch.

**A quick vote can be organized to choose the winning campaign idea that the class then puts into action during the school year.*

Culmination [10 min]

Cycle 1 and Cycle 2

Lead the class in an interactive discussion, practicing possible responses to employ when faced with the most common insults or slang words used in their school. A few short scenarios re-enacted by students could even be encouraged depending on the classroom dynamic. Be sure to stress to the students the importance of being assertive while still respecting those around you. Remind the students that we all use offensive words sometimes; and the people we catch most often using these words will usually be our friends, which is why it is important to think of how we can respond in these situations.

Performance Objectives

Cycle 1

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

- Have a more complete understanding of the origins of certain street language.
- Understand how various slang terms influence and encourage gender expectations and sexual stereotypes.
- Reflect on the impact street language can have in their environment.

Cycle 2

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

- Have a more complete understanding of the origins of certain street language.
- Understand how various slang terms influence and encourage gender expectations and sexual stereotypes.
- Identify and analyze various aspects of what makes an effective sensitization campaign.

Assessment Ideas

Have students keep a journal throughout the week of all of the slang words and street language they hear at school, whether it be in the hallways or in their friend groups. Students can record the frequency and contexts in which these words are used and then produce a written report of the etymological history and meaning today of the top 10 words.

Cycle 2's Awareness Campaign Activity can be used as a group project to be completed over multiple periods or outside class time.

*Lesson plan connections: ELA 4: Poetical and Social Elements of Song Lyrics

**The "Four Corners Activity" and "How Violent Activity" were adapted from the *Speaking Rights Toolkit* (Equitas International Centre for Human Rights Education).*



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