LESSON PLAN

Intent vs. Impact: Why Does it Matter?

Compelling Question: Why should we prioritize impact over intent?

Grade Level	Time	Common Core Standards
K-2, 3-5, 6-12	45- 60 minutes	Reading, Writing Speaking and Listening, Language

LESSON OVERVIEW

In June 2022, singer Lizzo released the single, "GRRRLS." The song contained an ableist slur in it. There was immediate criticism and calling out of Lizzo for using this derogatory word, including by disability advocates and especially on social media. After taking in this criticism, Lizzo said, "It's been brought to my attention that there is a harmful word in my new song GRRRLS. Let me make one thing clear: I never want to promote derogatory language." Lizzo acknowledged that she didn't know it was an ableist slur and she changed the lyrics. This situation points to an important concept in communication, especially around using biased, offensive or insensitive language. Oftentimes there is a disconnect between what we intend to communicate and the way our words impact others.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn about the difference between intent and impact in our communication, reflect on their thoughts and feelings about this concept, and use common scenarios to explore how to effectively prioritize impact over intent.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand the difference between "intent" and "impact" in communication.
- Students will reflect on their thoughts, feelings and experiences about the disconnect between intent and impact and the extent to which "words matter."
- Students will gain skills in being able to more effectively consider impact over intent in communicating with others.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- Lizzo Instagram Post
- Here I Am Statement Signs (prepared in advance): "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "In between/not sure," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree"
- When it Comes to Bias, We Must Prioritize Impact Over Intent (one copy for each student)
- Scenarios for Intent vs. Impact Practice

Web Related Connections

Lesson Plans

Everyday Bias

Microaggressions in Our Lives

Slurs, Offensive Jokes and How to Respond

Other Resources

Challenging Biased Language

Guidelines for Achieving Bias-Free Communication

Jokes, Excuses and Why Words Matter

Responding to Jokes and Slurs

Key Words

ableism
acknowledge
activist
bias
camaraderie
consequential
derogatory
impact
intent
marginalized
offensive
overt
perspective
prioritize
slur
subtle
swastika
threaten

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Information Sharing: What is Intent and Impact?

1. Ask students: *What have you heard about Lizzo's recently released song, GRRRLS?* Allow several students to share what they know or heard.
2. Explain that in June 2022, the singer Lizzo released the single, single "GRRRLS." The song contained an ableist slur (sp-z) in it. There was immediate criticism and calling out of Lizzo, including by disability advocates and especially on social media, for using this derogatory word. After taking in this criticism, **Lizzo responded with the following statement on Instagram**. You can either read the statement below or share the Instagram post and have students read it silently or aloud.

[Note: If students don't know what a slur is, define as follow: an insulting, offensive or degrading remark, often based on an identity group such as race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, religion, ethnic, gender/gender identity or sexual orientation.]

> "It's been brought to my attention that there is a harmful word in my new song 'GRRRLS. Let me make one thing clear: I never want to promote derogatory language. As a fat Black woman in America, I've had many hurtful words used against me so I overstand the power words can have (whether intentionally or in my case, unintentionally.) I'm proud to say there's a new version of GRRRLS with a lyric change. This is the result of me listening and taking action. As an influential artist I'm dedicated to being part of the change I've been waiting to see in the world."

[Note: If students do not know, explain that "sp-z" is a derogatory term against people with cerebral palsy. The word "sp-z" is short for "spastic" which references the inability for a disabled person to control their movements.]

3. After sharing the Lizzo post, engage students in a brief discussion by asking: *What is happening here? In what ways were Lizzo's original lyrics that used the word "sp-z," offensive? What does Lizzo say about using harmful words intentionally or unintentionally? Were people harmed by her words even though she didn't mean to offend? Please explain.*
4. Make a T-chart with the word "intent" on the left and "impact" on the right. As students respond to the questions about intent and impact, record the words and phrases that they share. Ask students: *When we are communicating with others (either individuals or groups of people), what do we mean by the **intent** of our words?* Brainstorm their thoughts and ideas and record on the T-chart. Explain/elicit that intent is what we mean by our words or actions, what we are hoping to convey to others. Ask: *In the example of Lizzo's lyrics, what did she mean to convey?*
5. Then ask: *When we are communicating with others, what do we mean by the **impact** of our words*? Brainstorm their thoughts and ideas and record on the T-chart. Elicit/explain that impact means how those words or actions are experienced, felt or understood by either the person they are directed to, or others. Ask: *In the example of Lizzo's lyrics, how did those words impact others, especially people who are disabled?*

Explain to students that sometimes there is a disconnect between what someone means to say and how their words impact or are experienced by others. Sometimes this is because the words are slurs (like in the Lizzo example) although the person using the slur may not know it is a slur. Sometimes this disconnect happens because the words are non-inclusive (like using only she and he), or outdated (e.g., using Indian instead of Native American or Indigenous).

6. Engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of following questions:
   - Have you ever had an experience when your words didn't convey what you meant to say, or they harmed others? What happened and how did you feel?
   - Have you ever been on the other side of this type of interaction where language directed at you (or your identity group) caused harm even though that wasn't the intention? What happened and how did you feel?
   - What happens when your intent doesn't match the impact your words have on another person?
   - How can you better match your impact with your intent?

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Here I Am Activity

1. Explain to students that in the "Here I Am" activity, they will explore their thoughts and feelings about this topic. Explain that they will listen to statements and decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. Then, based on their opinion about each statement, students will position themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement.
2. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line with the farthest right point representing a STRONGLY AGREE response and the farthest left point a STRONGLY DISAGREE response. In between these two positions, indicate AGREE, IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE, AND DISAGREE along the continuum. Create signs with these words and hang them up on the wall.

[Note: If you are doing this activity online or in a space that is unable to accommodate students moving around, conduct a poll instead, with students raising hands or using a digital poll like Google forms, Mentimeter or a poll included in your learning platform.]

3. Read each statement below (or choose a sub-set if time doesn't permit using all of them), requesting students to take a few minutes to decide where they will position themselves in the continuum. Then, have them move silently to that place and observe where others are. After students have chosen their spots, have them spend 2–3 minutes talking amongst themselves about why they are situated there. Then, spend a few minutes with someone from each part of the room sharing their thoughts with the class. Use this process for each of the statements.
   - Lizzo was right to change her lyrics.
   - It's impossible to really know what impact your words will have on others.
   - You can't hurt someone with your words.
   - It's important to think about impact, but it's really hard to do in the moment.
   - I have hurt or harmed people with my words and wish I could learn how not to.
   - Words matter.
4. Lead a whole group discussion using the following questions.
   - Was it easy or difficult to decide where to position yourself? Were some statements easier to decide and some more difficult?
   - What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about others?
   - Was there anything said that changed or challenged your previous thinking? Please explain.
   - Have you shifted your opinion during or after the activity? Please explain.
   - What did you learn from this activity?
5. Optional: Have students do a 3–5-minute "Quick Write" that responds to the following question: After doing this activity, have you either shifted your position in some way or feel firmer in your position about intent and impact? Please explain.

Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy of When it Comes to Bias, We Must Prioritize Impact Over Intent to each student. Provide 10 minutes for students to read silently, or read aloud as a class with different students taking turns reading.
2. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:
   - What is the overall message of the article?
   - What is your biggest takeaway from the article?
   - What examples does the article cite for the disconnect between intent and impact?
   - What are some of the suggested strategies for prioritizing impact over intent?
   - What other strategies would you suggest to prioritize impact in your communication?

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- Why is it important to prioritize impact, or not cause harm with your words?
- Do you think it's difficult or easy to prioritize the impact of your behavior? Please explain?

Scenarios: Practice Prioritizing Impact Over Intent

1. Divide students into small groups of 4-5 students each. Provide one scenario to each small group and explain that each is an example of the intent not matching the impact.

[Note: You can also create your own scenarios if you think other scenarios would better resonate with your students. However, be mindful not to use names of actual students or staff in your school or examples that are too specific and will highlight a past conflict or situation.]

2. When small groups are situated, explain that they will have 10-15 minutes to read and discuss their scenario. They should discuss what is happening in the scenario, address the questions below, and discuss whatever else about the scenario they'd like to discuss. Each small group should assign a recorder (to take notes) and a reporter (to share aloud with the rest of the class).
   - What is happening in this scenario? What is the disconnect between intent and impact?
   - How is the person (or people) negatively impacted, hurt or harmed?
   - What could the people who caused the harm say or do differently? What can they do to repair the harm?
   - What can you learn from this scenario in order to not negatively impact, hurt or harm others?
3. Reconvene the class and have each small group share their scenario and what was discussed in their small group. Allow each group to present for 2-3 minutes each.
4. After all the groups have presented, engage the class in a brief discussion by asking:
   - What was it like for you to discuss specific scenarios?
   - Was it easy or difficult to come up with a different way to communicate? How so?
   - What did you learn from this activity?

Closing

Have students share one way they can be more mindful to prioritize impact over intent in communicating with others.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- Ableist Language To Avoid And Acceptable Alternatives – Spaz Edition (The Rolling Explorer, September 13, 2022)
- As Lizzo was called out for ableism, many Black disabled people felt overlooked (NPR, June 16, 2022)
- Intent vs. Impact: Closing the gap (Bravely, January 23, 2021)
- Intent vs. Impact: The Communication Disconnect (Enspira, September 7, 2021)
- Lizzo releases new version of 'GRRRLS' with lyric change after blowback for use of ableist slur (Entertainment, June 13, 2022).

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Common Core Anchor Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. SL3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate. L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

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Lizzo Instagram Post

Yitty | Instagram

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When it Comes to Bias, We Must Prioritize Impact Over Intent

A middle school student doodles swastikas in his notebook and shows it to a classmate sitting nearby; later he tells his teacher he didn't know it was a hate symbol.

A staff member at a team meeting makes a sexist "joke," but when a colleague responds that they find it offensive, the person retorts with, "I was only kidding."

A group of white teenagers sing along to a song, loudly vocalizing the N-word in the lyrics; when the incident is reported, the students respond that they "were just singing along" and they weren't "using a slur on purpose."

In each of these examples, there is a disconnect between intent and impact. Those using biased or offensive language excuse their behavior by pointing to being unaware, their ignorance or a lack of "bad" intentions, instead of acknowledging the harmful impact of their offensive words and actions on the people around them.

What's the difference between intent and impact?

Intent is ***what we mean*** by our words or actions. Impact is how those words or actions are ***experienced, felt or understood*** by either the person they are directed to, or others.

When it comes to biased language or actions, we often prioritize intent over impact. This means that when harm is caused, we tend to emphasize what we meant by our words or actions—rather than how our words made another person feel or the consequences of our behavior. We might also excuse, or brush under the rug, the offensive words or actions if we perceive them as unintentional. In discussing a biased incident, we might redirect the focus to a person's intentions (i.e., "I didn't mean it like that"), rather than focusing on the feelings of the person who has been harmed. In this way, we center intention rather than the impact on others.

Prioritizing intent happens every day in all aspects of our lives—in the classroom, at work, in public spaces, online and at home.

Why is it important to prioritize impact?

Regardless of intent or whether actions and words were purposeful, the targeted or affected person is still harmed. That's why it is critical to prioritize impact and acknowledge the harm that was caused.

Using the example of the sexist "joke" at the staff meeting, the staff member who told the joke may not have realized it was sexist. Perhaps they wanted to make everyone laugh, or build camaraderie or intimacy. Or maybe the person is a new team member and humor is their usual way to connect with others. But their sexist "joke" caused harm to other members of the team, particularly those who are experiencing sexism in other aspects of the job. The joke made them feel even more excluded and marginalized than they already feel. Instead of saying "I was only kidding," the person who made the comment should have focused on the harm they caused.

Whether intentional or not, offensive and biased words—even jokes—cause harm. That harm or impact can take many forms. It can feel like a direct attack on the identity of a targeted person—on a core part of who they are. It can cause a person to feel they don't belong, that their feelings aren't important, or that they aren't respected or valued. It can cause the targeted person to stop participating in an activity or group. They might even leave a job or start skipping school. The harm can result in making the targeted person feel uncomfortable, scared or threatened because they fear that comments could be precursors to more consequential acts of bias (e.g., discrimination, violence). The harmful and offensive words and actions can also target others who identify in that same way, or other marginalized identity groups who feel their group could be next.

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Why can it be difficult to prioritize impact?

A recent example involving singer Lizzo is illustrative. When Lizzo released a song with an ableist slur in it, disability activists brought the hurtful nature of the word to Lizzo's attention. She did not know it was a slur and her lack of knowledge of and sensitivity to ableist language caused her to use it unknowingly and as a result, cause harm.

It's not always easy to prioritize impact over intent. Like Lizzo, we may not be able to anticipate the harm we cause others because we lack the knowledge or understanding of offensive words and language, be they subtle or overt. We may not know or understand the history, experiences and perspectives of the people with whom we are communicating. Not having this background information can cause us to harm them unintentionally. As a society and as individuals, we tend to see things from our own points of view and often lack the ability to see and understand things from others' point of view. That is what we need to change.

Privilege can also be a factor. It is a privilege to not have to be concerned about or consider the impact of our words, especially on marginalized identity groups. For the identity groups for which we hold privilege, we may not see, understand or feel the harm of those in the marginalized group because it doesn't affect us or our group.

How can we prioritize impact?

How do we prevent ourselves from causing harm to begin with? What can we do to avoid negatively impacting another person by our words and actions when we don't mean to?

First, do a gut check. If you feel unsure or uncomfortable about something you plan to say, or if you think your words could be misunderstood or harmful, take time to reconsider what you are about to say or do. Take a pause to self-reflect and ask yourself a few questions that center on the potential impact of your words and actions. It's best to err on the side of caution, especially when you are communicating in public spaces like schools, workplaces and communities that need to be welcoming and inclusive.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Who is the person/community to whom I'm directing these comments? What identity group(s) do they belong to? In what ways could their experience and perspective differ from my own?
- If I have caused harm in the past, what have I learned from that?
- Could these words be misunderstood or cause harm? How so?
- Would I use this language with someone else or a different community?
- Could someone perceive my words or actions as biased, insensitive or offensive? Could my words make this environment less welcoming to some people, even if they are not here now?
- What words could I use instead?
- If I am trying to convey familiarity and closeness by using a joke or other language, what is another way to convey that feeling that won't cause harm?

Even if you actively work to prevent harm, your words or actions may still negatively impact another person, even if it's not on purpose.

When Lizzo was given the feedback about her offensive lyric, she listened, reflected on her actions and then re-released the song without the slur in the lyrics. She explained, "I've had many hurtful words used against me so I understand the power words can have (whether intentionally or in my case, unintentionally)." Lizzo acknowledged—whether intentional or not—she caused harm and then took steps to repair that harm. She prioritized the impact of her words, rather than her intentions.

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If you realize the harm in the moment (such as by observing others' body language or facial expressions) or learn later you've caused harm, here are some strategies for responding.

1. Resist the urge to say things like, "I didn't mean it like that," "That was a miscommunication," "I was just joking," or "You're reading into it too much."
2. If the person shares with you why it was harmful, listen with the goal to understand and empathize, not defend or explain yourself.
3. Center the person who was harmed—their feelings, experiences, and perspective—not yourself or your intentions.
4. Apologize and/or acknowledge the impact that your words or actions had on the person.
5. Learn from your mistake, and do better. Depending on your relationship with the targeted person, seek to learn more without putting the responsibility on them to educate you.
6. Take responsibility for your own learning about harmful language by reflecting on those and other harmful words by reading, watching and listening.

Our words are powerful and consequential. Our words can inflict harm. However, our words can also be used to take accountability and make amends when we've caused harm. The more we focus on the impact of our words, the more likely our schools, online spaces, workplaces and communities will be safe, respectful and inclusive for all.

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Scenarios for Intent vs. Impact Practice

SCENARIO #1
A group of young people are hanging out after school at one of the friends' houses. They're listening to music and a song comes on that uses the N-word several times. Everyone is singing along. Among the group are two Black young people and the rest of them are white. As the N-word comes onto the song, the white kids say it out loud and are kind of giggling when they say it. The two Black young people feel uncomfortable but don't know what to say.

SCENARIO #2
In Math class, a teacher was demonstrating how to calculate angles. To show how to do it, he straightened his arm out, then lowered it and then raised it up again. He realized in that moment that it looked like he was making a Nazi salute. Feeling awkward and uncomfortable, he said "Heil Hitler" which he thought was a way of easing the tension and making a joke of the whole thing. A few students laughed, but most of the class looked down and didn't know how to react.

SCENARIO #3
Everyone uses emojis all the time—with texting, on social media, gaming, DMing, etc. For the hand, finger and people emojis, there are options for different skin complexions. Most people use the complexion that matches their race or skin complexion, but you often see one or two people that always use the darkest skin complexion even though they are light-skinned or white. People of color are often annoyed or even offended by this but don't say anything about it.

SCENARIO #4
An English teacher always addresses her students as "boys and girls." When she dismisses the class, she often first dismisses "all boys," and then "all girls," or visa versa. When dividing students into small groups for discussions, she says out loud that she wants to make sure to have an even number of boys and girls in each group. She always uses "she/he" as a generic term. The two non-binary students in the class don't know what to do when she does this; they feel uncomfortable and annoyed.

SCENARIO #5
In U.S. history class, during a unit on Immigration, the class was discussing current day immigration patterns and the people who are immigrating from Latin American countries like Mexico and the Dominican Republic as well as immigrants and asylum seekers from Venezuela and Guatemala. Several students start snickering about "building the wall" and one student asked the teacher, "Aren't we supposed to be building the wall to keep people out? We have enough people here."

SCENARIO #6
It's "Multicultural Day" at school and there are events, wall displays and activities that are intended to be focused on different racial and ethnic groups from around the world, and to help everyone feel included and welcomed. There are different words used in some of the programming and displays like "Indian," "Oriental," and "Minority." This special day is supposed to help people feel included but the outdated language makes some feel the opposite.

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