

Lesson 2: Grades 6 & Up

The History and Impact of Anti-LGBT Slurs

Overview

In this lesson students listen to the oral history of an advocate for LGBT family rights, and use her personal story as a vehicle for considering how anti-LGBT attitudes are formed. Students explore the derivation of the words “gay,” “faggot” and “dyke” in order to better understand the long history of judgment and hate behind these words. They also reflect on the testimony of LGBT teens about the impact of terms like “that’s so gay.”

[NOTE: This lesson explores LGBT issues in an open and direct way. Given the absence of this topic in the curriculum and the disproportionate rates of anti-LGBT bullying and harassment, it is important to educate students about these issues. When discussing any new or sensitive topic, however, there is the potential for some students to react in stereotypical or disrespectful ways. It is therefore imperative that educators carefully review the lesson, assess students’ maturity and readiness to engage in the lesson prior to implementation, and establish clear parameters with students that will ensure safe and constructive dialogue. See [“Establishing a Safe Learning Environment”](#) and [“Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment”](#) for guidelines on building safe forums for discussing sensitive issues.]

Objectives

- Students will reflect on the oral history of an individual involved in the LGBT rights movement.
- Students will learn about the history of anti-LGBT slurs.
- Students will analyze media ads about anti-LGBT language.
- Students will identify ways to reduce their use of hurtful language.

Time

55–70 mins. or two class periods

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [Dictionary Print Ad: “Gay,” “Faggot” and “Dyke”](#) (one per small group; middle school option only)
- [The History of the Word “Gay,” “Faggot” and “Dyke”](#) (one per small group’ high school option only)
- [Youth Voices on “That’s So Gay”](#) (one copy)

Other Material:

- Unheard Voices [audio interviews and transcripts](#) and [interview backgrounders](#)
- Scissors, computer, speakers, projector/screen (optional)

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Prepare to play interview (see Part I #2).
- (Optional) Prepare projector/screen for viewing ads (see Part II #2).
- Chart questions (see step Part II #2, middle school option).
- Cut the [Youth Voices on “That’s So Gay”](#) into individual strips of quotes (see Part III #1).

Techniques and Skills

connecting past to present, cooperative group work, critical thinking, debate, forming opinions, historical understanding, large and small group discussion, media literacy, reading skills

Key Words

Advocate (n.)
Demoralized
Heretic
LGBT (lesbian, gay,
bisexual and
transgender)
Offensive
Slur

Procedures

Part I: “Two Kinds of Gay” (15 minutes)

1. Tell students that you are going to share a brief excerpt from an [interview](#) and provide the following context:

Terry Boggis is an advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights and helped to found Center Families in 1988, a New York City based program for LGBT parents and their children. In this interview, she talks about being a lesbian parent and the experiences of her son, Ned, at about the time he first started school.

2. Play the Terry Boggis [interview](#) from :28 to 1:22 and discuss the following questions with students.
 - Regarding Ned’s first experiences with school, Terry observes that “the larger culture starts weighing in”? What does she mean by this? Does this comment relate to any experiences that you have had?
 - What kinds of experiences do you think led Ned to ask if there are “two kinds of gay people,” “good kinds and bad kinds”?
 - Why did Terry assume that wearing the rainbow rings and expressing gay pride might invite a negative response? Would you assume the same thing about the people at your camp or school? Why or why not?
 - In your experience, what language and/or ideas are communicated among your peers that might lead some people to believe gay is “bad”?

Optional: Play the full Terry Boggis [interview](#) (2:20) if students are curious/interested.

3. Point out that expressions like “that’s so gay” are used frequently among young people, many of whom excuse this language by saying that “it’s just a joke,” “it just means silly or stupid” and “it has nothing to do with gay people.” Explain that regardless of intentions, terms like these convey damaging messages to others. Emphasize that words, like people, have histories and often carry decades—even centuries—of weight and meaning that can have a greater impact than known.

Part II: The History of Anti-Gay Epithets (Middle School or High School Options)

Middle School Option, 30 minutes

Use this option for younger students or those with limited experience discussing LGBT issues; otherwise, skip to the high school option for a higher-level investigation.

1. Tell students that they are going to explore some ads about words that are commonly used to put down LGBT people in order to better appreciate the long history of ignorance, judgment and hate that are behind these words.
2. Divide the class into small groups of three to five students and provide groups with one copy each of [Dictionary Print Ad: “Gay,” “Faggot” and “Dyke.”](#) Post the questions below and instruct groups to review the ads collaboratively and discuss the questions. Allow about 10 minutes for small group work.
 - In your experience, how and where are these words used?
 - Though these terms are sometimes intended to just mean “silly” or “stupid,” is that the way they are heard or experienced by everyone? Why?
 - How would you say that expressions like “that’s so gay” and “you’re a fag/dyke”—used regularly—impact the atmosphere or climate at school?
 - When someone tells you that they are offended by this kind of language, is it okay to just say you “didn’t mean it like that”? How else might you respond?

Optional: If your students are unable to discuss the ads with respect independently, project the ads on a large screen and conduct this discussion as a large group.

3. Reconvene the class. Suggest that the words in the ads are often tossed around without much thought about the hate or hurtfulness behind them. Ask students what they know about the history of these words and how they came to be used as insults. (Use the handouts, [The History of the Word “Gay,” “Faggot” and “Dyke.”](#) as references to help you provide some historical context.)

4. Discuss the following questions:

- Are you surprised about how these words evolved over time? Can you still use the words today based on their original meaning?
- Now that you are aware of the history behind these words, will you continue to use them as jokes or insults against others? Why or why not?
- Do you think people in general would be less likely to use these words as jokes or insults if they knew the history behind them? Why or why not?
- How do you think words like these affected Terry and Ned (from the interview)? How do you think they affect other LGBT people or families with LGBT people?
- What can you do to educate your peers about the history and impact of anti-LGBT language?

High School Option, 45 minutes

Use this option for older students or those who are able to discuss LGBT issues with more sophistication; otherwise, go back to the middle school option for younger or more inexperienced students.

1. Tell students that they are going to read about the history of some words that are commonly used to put down LGBT people in order to better appreciate the long history of ignorance, judgment and hate that are behind these words.
2. Have students count off by three's. Tell the "ones" that they will read the handout, [The History of the Word "Gay"](#); assign the "twos" [The History of the Word "Faggot"](#); and assign the "threes" [The History of the Word "Dyke."](#) Tell students that, after reading the handouts independently, they will be grouped with classmates who have read a different handout and asked to summarize their reading. Distribute the handouts and give students about 10 minutes to read.

Optional: Have students summarize their reading by creating a "found poem"—selecting descriptive words, phrases and lines from the passage and arranging/formatting them to create a poem that captures the central ideas of the reading.

3. Form new small groups and make sure that all three readings are represented within each group. Instruct students to take turns presenting the main points of each reading to the group (or sharing their "found poems" if this option is used). Allow 10–15 minutes for discussion.
4. Reconvene the whole group and discuss the following questions.
 - What was the most surprising thing you learned from the articles?
 - Why do you think it's important to know the history of words you may hear and/or use?
 - Now that you are aware of the history behind these words, would you continue to use them? Why or why not?
 - Do you think people in general would be less likely to use these words if they knew the history behind them? Why or why not?
 - How do you think words like these affected Terry and Ned (from the interview)? How do you think they affect other LGBT people or families with LGBT people?
 - What can you do to educate your peers about the history of anti-LGBT language?

Part III: Conclusion (10 minutes)

1. Ask for nine volunteers and provide each with a quote from [Youth Voices on "That's So Gay."](#)
2. Tell students that they will be hearing the thoughts of LGBT teens on how expressions such as "that's so gay" impact them. Direct students to listen and reflect silently as each quote is read. Ask the volunteers to stand and read their quotes in succession.
3. Allow students to react to the quotes (e.g., which quote do you connect with the most?). Suggest that they think about these teens the next time they are tempted to use anti-LGBT words.

Dictionary Print Ad: “Gay”

gay (gā) **1.** there once was a time when all “gay” meant was “happy.” then it meant “homosexual.” now, people are saying “that’s so gay” to mean dumb and stupid. which is pretty insulting to gay people (and we don’t mean the “happy” people). **2.** so please, knock it off. **3.** go to ThinkB4YouSpeak.com



Dictionary Print Ad: “Faggot”

fag-got (fag'ət) **1.** there was a time when the word “faggot” meant a bundle of sticks. but then people started using it in an insulting, offensive way and things changed. so when you say things like “homo,” “dyke” and “that’s so gay” trying to be funny, remember, you may actually be hurting someone. **2.** so please, knock it off. **3.** get more information at ThinkB4YouSpeak.com



Dictionary Print Ad: “Dyke”

dyke (dīk) **1.** be honest with yourself. you’re not thinking of “an embankment that holds back and controls water.” the problem is, words like “dyke” and “faggot” are so commonly used as insults these days, it’s really hard to remember a time when they weren’t. **2.** so please, knock it off. **3.** learn more at ThinkB4YouSpeak.com



The History of the Word “Gay”

The word gay dates back to the 12th century and comes from the Old French “gai,” meaning “full of joy or mirth.” It may also be connected with the Old High German “gahi,” meaning impulsive. For centuries, gay was used commonly in speech and literature to mean happy, carefree, bright and showy, and did not take on any sexual meaning until the 1600s.

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At that time the meaning of gay as carefree evolved to imply that a person was unrestrained by morals and prone to decadence and promiscuity. A prostitute might have been described as a “gay woman” and a womanizer as a “gay man.” “Gay house” was commonly used to refer to a brothel and, later, “gaiety” was used as a common name for certain places of entertainment.

In the 1890s, the term “gey cat” (a Scottish variant of gay) was used to describe a vagrant who offered sexual services to women, or a young traveler who was new to the road and in the company of an older man. This latter use suggests that the younger man was in a sexually submissive role and may be among the first times that gay was used to imply a homosexual relationship.

In 1951, gay appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary for the first time as slang for homosexual, but was most likely used in this way “underground” at least 30 years earlier. For example, in the 1938 film, *Bringing Up Baby*, Cary Grant dons a feathery robe when his clothes are sent to the cleaners and says, “...I just went gay.” This line (ad-libbed by Grant) can be interpreted to mean that he was behaving in a happy-go-lucky or lighthearted way, but is accepted by many as the first use of gay to mean homosexual in a mainstream movie.

Today gay is a socially accepted term for homosexual people. However, this word is rooted in the classification of certain types of people as illicit, counterculture or behaving in ways that go against the respectable conventions of society. When gay is used today to mean stupid or undesirable (it has only been used in this way since the 1990s), it carries with it a history of negative judgment and rigid ideas about who or what is acceptable.

The History of the Word “Faggot”

You may know that “faggot” means “a bundle of sticks.” The word “faggot” has been part of the English language since the 1300s. When and how did it become an anti-gay slur?

fag-got (fag'ət) **1.** there was a time when the word “faggot” meant a bundle of sticks. but then people started using it in an insulting, offensive way and things changed. so when you say things like “homo,” “dyke” and “that’s so gay” trying to be funny, remember, you may actually be hurting someone. **2.** so please, knock it off. **3.** get more information at ThinkB4YouSpeak.com



During the European Inquisitions, “faggot” referred to the sticks used to set fires for burning heretics, or people who opposed the teachings of the Catholic Church. Heretics were required to gather bundles of sticks (“faggots”) and carry them to the fire that was being built for them.

Heretics who changed their beliefs to avoid being killed were forced to wear a “faggot” design embroidered on their sleeve, to show everyone that they had opposed the Church. Since it was hard to live with such a bad reputation, people began to use the word “faggot” to refer to anything that was considered to be a burden or difficult to bear. Unfortunately, the term quickly became a sexist insult, as people used it to disrespect women in the same way the term “ball and chain” is used today.

The word “faggot” appeared in the United States during the early 20th century. It was used to refer to men who were seen as less masculine than people believed they should be. During the course of the 20th century, the word “faggot” became the slur most commonly used to abuse gay men and men perceived to be gay. In fact, “faggot” has become a general insult that is often used to humiliate any man. Since many people are biased against LGBT people, being called “faggot” is a big fear of many heterosexual men, and thus the easiest way to hurt them. Considering the long and violent history of the word, it’s important for people to understand its meaning before they use it so carelessly.

The History of the Word “Dyke”

“Dyke” is a very old word. You may have encountered it already in a science class; it’s a mass of mineral matter that fills a hole in a rock formation. Or, you may have seen it in a geography lesson; it refers to a variety of ditches, trenches, caves and dams that have been built by many different civilizations. None of these definitions, however, relates to the modern usage of “dyke” as a slur directed at lesbian women or women perceived to be lesbian.

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One theory about the origin of “dyke” as an anti-lesbian slur suggests that “dyke” came from the word “hermaphrodite,” which used to be a very common term describing people born with ambiguous sex characteristics. When the word “hermaphrodite” was more commonly used, popular variations such as “morphodite” and “morphodike” sprang up. Some people believe that “dyke” came from “morphodike” and was used to reinforce the stereotype that all lesbians look and act like men.

Early British history provides another theory about the origin of the word “dyke.” Boudicca (pronounced “bou-dikka”) was a chieftain/queen in the Iceni tribe in Britain during the 1st century C.E. At the death of her husband, according to his will, Boudicca was given control of the tribe. But the Romans, who were occupying Britain, did not recognize the will of Boudicca’s husband, and seized his land and property, flogging Boudicca and raping her two daughters in the process. Boudicca then led a victorious armed revolt against the Romans, but they ultimately countered the attack and slaughtered many Iceni.

No matter which theory is the most accurate, all point to the word “dyke” having its roots in beliefs about how women are supposed to look and act. Women who have refused to conform to society’s expectations of them often have been labeled as “dykes,” whether or not they have identified as lesbians.

Youth Voices on “That’s So Gay”



“If you mean ‘that’s so stupid,’ why don’t you just say ‘that’s stupid’? It’s really degrading to hear ‘gay’ being used as the new ‘stupid.’” (Austin, age 15, CA)



“If we aren’t supposed to say ‘that’s retarded’ because it’s offensive, how is ‘that’s so gay’ any less offensive?” (Michael, age 17, KS)



“I get so angry when someone says, ‘that’s so gay.’ I can’t imagine how, well, unclever someone has to be to use that phrase. I wish people were more aware of what they say.” (Adrien, age 16, WI)



“[When people say ‘that’s so gay,] I don’t get angry, they don’t mean it in a hateful way. They just say it because others do, and they don’t even know what they’re saying anymore, or who they’re hurting.” (Tyler, age 15, NC)



“When I hear ‘that’s so gay,’ I think...that’s so ignorant!” (Chris, age 15, OH)



“When I hear ‘that’s so gay,’ a chill rushes through my body and my heart drops into the pit of my stomach.” (Kaitlyn, age 17, MI)



“When I hear ‘that’s so gay,’ I get tightness in my chest. Sometimes when I hear it from several people in a large group, I get a rush of anxiety. Hearing that can really ruin my day.” (Ayanna, age 16, GA)



“[When I hear ‘that’s so gay,] I feel demoralized, as if the world does not care about others.” (David, age 16, VA)



“If I were to tell you how ‘that’s so gay’ makes me feel, would you continue saying it?” (Nate, age 17, NV)