



# THE POWER OF WORDS

**Level:** 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle of high school

**Duration:** 2 periods of 75 minutes + homework (over several weeks)

**Goal:** To create an awareness among students of the gap between their perception of the acceptance of homophobia and the intention and impact of expressions such as “that is so gay” or “you’re gay.” Students are asked to create a media campaign aiming to correct misconceptions and to incite others to abandon use of these expressions.

| LINK WITH THE PROGRAMME  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Broad Areas of Learning</b>                                 | Citizenship and Community Life.   |
| <b>Educational Aim</b>   | To enable students to take part in the democratic life of the class or the school and develop an attitude of openness to the world and respect for diversity. |
| <b>Focuses of Development</b>                                  | Participation, cooperation and solidarity.  |
| COMPETENCIES   |   |
| <b>Interdisciplinary competencies</b>                          | Reflects on ethical questions<br>Engages in Dialogue  |
| <b>This activity may be integrated in two programme themes</b> | In the first cycle: <b>Autonomy</b><br>In the second cycle: <b>Justice</b>  |
| <b>Concepts developed</b>                                      | Ethical choice, community life and recognition of others.   |

**Acknowledgement:** Please note that the learning and evaluation situation in this document was adapted from the following sources: [www.thinkb4youspeak.com](http://www.thinkb4youspeak.com) and: [www.alanberkowitz.com/Social\\_Norms\\_Violence\\_Prevention\\_Toolkit.pdf](http://www.alanberkowitz.com/Social_Norms_Violence_Prevention_Toolkit.pdf)

## STEP 1: INTRODUCE THE SUBJECT

# 5 MIN

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| <b>Autonomy (cycle 1)</b> | To gain autonomy you need to build on knowledge and reflection. In this way your actions should be clearer. But this is not always the case. Our actions are often defined by what we perceive others think or do. At one moment or another in our lives all of us have said “everyone does that” or “everyone thinks that way”. In school, we often hear expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay.” Let’s take a moment to think about these types of expressions and why they seem to be acceptable in our society.   |
| <b>Justice (cycle 2)</b>  | Conceived as the fair treatment of individuals, justice is supported by laws and institutions which guarantee the application of these laws. However, an institutional approach is not enough. Take, for example, homosexual or bisexual persons. Canadian and Quebec laws guarantee their total equality: right to marriage, parental rights, and protection against discrimination. Nevertheless, homophobia remains very present, particularly in schools. Together we will look at how we can move towards a more equitable situation in our daily lives, not just at the level of jurisdiction in our society. |

## STEP 2: ESTABLISH (OR REMIND STUDENTS OF) THE DISCUSSION RULES

# 15 MIN

The following rules must be agreed upon by the group in order to ensure a safe space for discussion:

**Respect Others:** You will hear ideas that may be different or new to you, and opinions with which you may disagree. As you participate and interact, try to take in new information without judgement and to keep an open mind. Make sure that your words and body language reflect a respectful attitude towards others. Learn by listening to others.

**Speak from the “I”:** Speak from your own personal experiences and try not to judge the experiences of others. Use I-statements such as “I feel...” or “In my experience...”. Avoid “You should...” or “You all think that...” statements and generalizations of any kind.

**Ask Questions:** Much of the information we will cover will be new to many of you. Feel free to ask any questions that come up for you – either during the activity or privately afterwards – without fear that they are too “silly.” Make sure to phrase all questions in respectful and nonjudgmental ways.

**Respect Confidentiality:** Please make sure that everything said in the room stays in the room. When sharing personal anecdotes, make sure to avoid using the real names of other people.

**Share “Air Time”:** While you are encouraged to express your ideas and opinions, please do not monopolize the group’s time. Help create a safe space in which everyone can speak. No one, however, is obliged to speak. “Passing” is okay..

## STEP 3: SURVEY THE CLASS CONCERNING THE USE AND PREVALENCE OF EXPRESSIONS SUCH AS “THAT’S SO GAY” OR “YOU’RE GAY.”

# 25 MIN

- A** Present statements to which the students are asked to agree or disagree using the **survey slide show**. Many possibilities exist to ensure that answers are immediate and anonymous. If students have electronic devices, numerous applications may be used to carry out anonymous surveys. Plickers ([www.plickers.com](http://www.plickers.com)) is an excellent tool. Another way is to have students place their heads on the desk and respond by lifting their hand. You can then write the results on a sheet of paper.
- B** During the discussion which follows the survey results, it is important to keep an open mind and withhold judgement so that that students respond as honestly as possible.

### STEP 3 (CONTINUED)

| SURVEY STATEMENTS |   |
|-------------------|---|
| 1                 | I often hear expressions such as “that’s so gay” and “you’re gay.”  |
| 2                 | When I hear “that’s so gay” it is usually addressed to an object rather than a person.  |
| 3                 | When people say “that’s so gay” they don’t say it as an insult against people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB).   |
| 4                 | Regardless of their intent, the expressions “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay” are insulting to LGB people and to those who have LGB persons in their entourage. |
| 5                 | I have never thought about how expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay” could affect others.   |
| 6                 | I have used expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay” with my friends.  |
| 7                 | When expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay” are directed towards me I find it upsetting.   |
| 8                 | Expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay” are okay as long as they are not a direct attack against an LGB person.                                   |
| 9                 | Expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay” are never okay.   |
| 10                | It would be impossible to convince students in my school to limit or stop using expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay.”                          |
| 11                | Personally, I would prefer to limit or stop my use of expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay.”  |

#### C Teacher Feedback:

##### Some questions to ask:

- Which statements did you feel were easier to decide upon? Which were harder? Why?
- Did the group responses to one or more statements surprise you? Which ones? Why?
- Were you part of a minority in your response to one or more statements? How do you feel about being part of a minority?

#### D Survey result remarks:

- We notice that expressions like “that’s so gay” or “you’re gay” are very present, so it is important to continue working on this question.
- We notice that a large number of students consider these expressions not to be an attack against LGB persons.

#### E Concerning answers to **questions 10 and 11**:

- If the majority of responses to question 10 is NO and to question 11 is YES, this is the occasion to explain to your students that they misperceived what the group was thinking. While students often believe that the group majority is at ease with homophobic expressions, when asked the question individually the majority would prefer not to hear or use homophobic expressions.
- If the majority of responses to question 11 is NO, do not share this information with the students immediately. (You will do so later.) To share it immediately might create the opposite of the effect desired, with individuals engaging in this behaviour less likely to assume responsibility for it, letting the group assume it all.

#### F The students fill-out their **logbook**.

MISPERCEPTION OF SOCIAL NORMS

Extensive studies indicate that students in high school, college and university have misperceptions of social norms. For example, most students believe that the majority finds it "cool" to engage in sexist talk or to drink alcohol, while in reality the majority is very ill-at-ease with this. The impact of misperceptions is major. You might find yourself using language or engaging in behaviour that would normally be against your values. Or witnesses might be discouraged from intervening for fear of being stigmatized or left-out. All this because we misperceive what is happening around us.

If, on the other hand, we succeed in perceiving social norms correctly, then we can empower the silent majority. When they intervene they will do so with the support of the group, encouraging others not to use sexist language or to drink less.

To find out more: [www.alanberkowitz.com/Social\\_Norms\\_Violence\\_Prevention\\_Toolkit.pdf](http://www.alanberkowitz.com/Social_Norms_Violence_Prevention_Toolkit.pdf)

- A** Remind students that expressions such as "that's so gay" and "you're gay" are used in school every day by people who have no intention of using homophobic expressions or hurtful words. When they do so, they claim to be "having fun," "among friends." If this is pertinent, you can use the results of the survey in step 3.
- B** Introduce the activity. (See the **role play** document.)
- C** Form 8 teams and distribute the roles. Each team must discuss what his character feels in the situation described.
- D** Pool the team discussions.
- E** Discuss as a group:
- When all perspectives are taken into consideration, how do these expressions influence the school's climate?
  - How do you think people feel when they constantly hear a word used to describe something undesirable or stupid when this word corresponds to their own identity or to that of someone close to them?
  - What are other expressions used to describe a person's identity or situation that are denigrating? (For example, "You are playing like a girl," "She's nothing but white trash," "What do you expect from a dirty Arab?"). Is the use of these expressions appropriate?
- F** Students fill-out their **logbook**.

## STEP 5: ENRICH YOUR VOCABULARY

# 15 MIN

- A** Listen to the **video Think before you speak**. In teams of two, students must find 5 adjectives to replace the word “gay” when something does not suit them.

| EXAMPLES OF ADJECTIVES WITH NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS |                  |               |             |
|---|------------------|---------------|-------------|
| ridiculous  | pointless        | pathetic      | wacky       |
| stupid  | futile           | old-fashioned | strange     |
| idiotic   | null             | unfortunate   | odd         |
| weird   | without interest | deplorable    | boring      |
| childish  | banal            | shabby        | tedious     |
| foolish   | ordinary         | mean-spirited | senseless   |
| absurd  | shabby           | bizarre       | frustrating |

- B** Students fill-out their **logbook**.

## STEP 6: CREATE A MEDIA CAMPAIGN FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

# 60 MINUTES + HOMEWORK

- A** Ask students to respond to statement 11 of the survey once again. (See Step 3) Compare the results.
- Look at the previous answers to question 10: This is a good time to remind students about perceptions of social norms. (See Step 3) The students originally believed that few people would be willing to stop using homophobic expressions even though the group majority declared wishing to stop.
  - Look at the previous answers to question 11: Positive answers to this question will have progressed. This demonstrates that bringing a new perspective and encouraging discussion can bring about more change. By creating a media campaign on social norms, students will be able to share what they have learned with their school community.
- B** Explain to students that this media campaign will be based on social norms using the first document in the **campaign** presentation. This campaign will try to correct the misperception of social norms to make sure that people are not isolated.
- C** Distribute the **show your support** document to the students. Show them examples of posters prepared by students dealing with alcohol or drugs. During one class, carry out a comparative analysis of the different posters. Students will be encouraged to find inspiration for their project and to better determine what makes an effective poster.
- D** Discuss the evaluation criteria for the activity.
- E** Students create a poster using computers or not.