



Education Department Resource

## Lesson Plan: What Do “Faggot” and “Dyke” Mean?

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**OVERVIEW:** According to the just-released results of GLSEN’s National School Climate Survey, 84.3 percent of the 904 LGBT youth surveyed reported hearing homophobic remarks, such as “faggot” or “dyke,” frequently or often. It seems that for quite a long time, “faggot” has been the slur of choice for people wishing to insult or harass gay men, men they perceive to be gay, or men they simply wish to humiliate regardless of their targets’ sexual orientation. Similarly, “dyke” has been used to target lesbian women, women perceived to be lesbian, or, in a common scenario, women refusing, for whatever reason, the sexual advances of men. There are many theories about the origin of these words, and how they came to be used as anti-LGBT slurs. In this lesson, students will engage in individual reflection and group discussion, read historical and current events analyses, conduct research, and plan awareness-raising actions to deepen their understanding of anti-LGBT bias and its impact on individuals and communities.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

- To help students to reflect upon and critique their own understanding of the terms “faggot” and “dyke,” and the way such terms are used by people in their school and community (including themselves)
- To provide students with an historical, social and political context for the terms “faggot” and “dyke”
- To help students in developing their writing and research skills through the task of keeping a “bias journal” in which they will document over the course of three days the number of times they hear “faggot,” “dyke,” and any other anti-LGBT slurs at school, and the responses they see and hear when such slurs are used
- To support students in planning and implementing peer education tactics for reducing anti-LGBT language in school (e.g. poster or flyer campaigns)
- To introduce students to the study of etymology and sociolinguistics (you may wish to define these terms for them)

**AGE LEVEL:** Adaptable for Middle and High School (“B” Handouts are simplified versions of “A” Handouts; you may wish to use either version depending on the age and reading ability of your students, or your time constraints)

**TIME:** 2+ class periods (80-120 minutes)

**MATERIALS:**

- Class 1**      Handout #1 (Versions A & B): ***The History of “Faggot”***  
                    Handout #2 (Versions A & B): ***The History of “Dyke”***  
**Class 2**      Handout #3: ***Navy Photo Shows Anti-Gay Slur on Bomb***

**SUBJECT AREAS:** Social Studies (Global History, U.S. History, U.S. Current Events, Government, Sociology); English (Etymology, Linguistic History)

<b><u>Class 1</u></b>	<b><u>Class 2</u></b>
Part 1 – Individual Reflection Part 2 – Group Discussion Part 3 – Group Reading and Response Part 4 – Research Assignment	Part 5 – Research Results Part 6 – Current Events Part 7 – Peer Education

**Class 1****Part 1 – INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION: How and Why People Use the Terms “Faggot” and “Dyke” (5-10 minutes)**

Instruct students to spend 5-10 minutes writing about their understanding of the terms “faggot” and “dyke,” or other anti-LGBT language they hear in their school and community. They should use the following questions to guide their reflection:

- ? What does the term “faggot” mean? What does the term “dyke” mean?
- ? Who gets called “faggot” in your school? (Don’t name specific names, just describe what type of people get called “faggot”.) Under what circumstances might someone get called “faggot?”
- ? Who gets called “dyke” in your school? (Again, no specific names, just describe what type of people get called “dyke”.) Under what circumstances might someone get called “dyke?”
- ? Are the terms “faggot” and “dyke” used only to insult LGBT people, or people perceived to be LGBT, in your school? What other types of people might get called “faggot” or “dyke” and why?
- ? Have you ever called anyone in your school “faggot” or “dyke?” What made you choose those words? How did the person/people react to being called those names?
- ? Have you ever been called “faggot” or “dyke” by anyone? Did you know why people chose to use those names to describe you? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?

**Part 2 – GROUP DISCUSSION: How and Why People Use the Terms “Faggot” and “Dyke” (15-20 minutes)** *Breaking into small groups is optional, if safety and respect can be maintained without teacher facilitation.*

Ask for volunteers to read or speak about what they wrote during the individual reflection.

**Cautionary Note:** *No one should be forced to share what they wrote, or put in a position where they’d draw unwanted attention to themselves by refusing to share when asked. There are many reasons why students may be reluctant to discuss their views on this topic, including: students may openly identify as LGBT but feel unsafe in this particular class; students may be closeted or questioning their sexual orientation; students who’ve experienced harassment may find it traumatizing to talk about; straight students who are perceived to be LGBT may not want to associate themselves publicly with LGBT issues; students with LGBT friends or relatives may not want to associate themselves publicly with LGBT issues, for fear of negative repercussions on their loved ones; students who engage in name-calling or have in the past may not want to admit it publicly.*

Try to keep the discussion focused on the attitudes, motivations, and behavior of those participating in the harassment, rather than the behavior of those being targeted for harassment. Too often LGBT students and those perceived to be LGBT are given the message – implicitly or explicitly - that somehow they’ve invited harassment by acting in a particular way, usually by transgressing rigid gender roles. Be sure to discuss the generalized use of anti-LGBT language, and the implications of that practice. Students often respond to criticism of their use of “faggot” by saying “It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just an insult, like “jerk” ...it doesn’t necessarily mean that you think the person is gay.” It can take a bit of pushing to get them to see the connection between using anti-LGBT slurs as general insults and more overt, specific forms of anti-LGBT bias.

**Part 3 - GROUP READING AND RESPONSE: *The History of “Faggot” and The History of “Dyke”* (20-30 minutes)**

Distribute Handouts #1 and #2 (choose versions “A” or “B” depending on your students and time constraints) to each student and read them aloud as a group. Once the group has finished reading the articles, discuss them using the following questions as a guide.

- ? 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?
- ? What are some of the other anti-LGBT insults commonly used by people in our school and community? What do you think they mean, and why do you think people use them? (Be sure to include “That’s so gay” – many students use this expression thinking it’s completely innocuous.)
- ? What can you do to educate your peers about the violent history of anti-LGBT language?

**Part 4 – RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT: Documenting Anti-LGBT Language in Our School**

For the next three days, each student will keep a “bias journal” in which they will attempt to document every anti-LGBT comment they hear in school. **For each case of bias they document, students should note six details:**

1. **WHO:** Whether the perpetrator(s) is/are a student(s), teacher(s), or other staff member(s)
2. **WHEN AND WHERE:** The location and time of the incident
3. **WHAT:** The exact words that are said, along with anything else that is said by the perpetrators (Be specific!)
4. **HOW:** The tone in which the comment is made (i.e. threatening, teasing, dismissing, and so on)
5. **RESPONSE:** The response of the person(s) being targeted, if any
6. **RESPONSE:** The response of bystanders to the incident, if any (including themselves)

**Class 2****Part 5 – CURRENT EVENTS: Anti-LGBT Language in the News (15-20 minutes)**

Distribute Handout #3 to each student and read it aloud as a group. Once the group has finished reading the articles, discuss them using the following questions as a guide.

1. **The Media’s Response:** What do you think of the way the photograph was handled by the media? How might it have been handled differently?
2. **The LGBT Rights Organizations’ Responses:** What do you think of the responses from GLAAD, SLDN, and HRC? Do you agree or disagree with their criticisms, and why?
3. **The Navy’s Response:** What do you think of the response of the Navy? Was it sufficient? Why or why not? How might the Navy have responded differently? What sort of message does their response send to military servicemembers and the general public?

Be sure to emphasize that these are very recent, serious events. The unchecked bigotry of the soldier, the indifference of the media, and the weak response from the Naval command all perfectly illustrate the insidiousness of anti-LGBT bias in U.S. society. A particular quote from the first article may serve as a useful discussion prompt:

*“Many of us in the media aren’t instinctively questioning the bigotry because in so many peoples’ eyes, using the word ‘fag’ or ‘faggot’ isn’t a social problem or something to be otherwise examined,” said Eric Hegedus, a photo editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer and board member of the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association.*

**Part 6 – RESEARCH RESULTS: Sharing and Comparing Our Findings (10-15 minutes)**

Ask for volunteers to share their bias journal findings. The following questions can help to guide the discussion. **You may wish to offer extra credit to a student(s) for compiling the entire group’s findings.**

1. What similarities or differences can we recognize in our research findings?
2. Where and when did most incidents of bias take place?
3. How obvious were the intentions of the perpetrators? Was it clear or unclear whether they meant to hurt anyone?
4. If anyone intervened, how did they do it? What was the result?
5. If no one intervened, what should be done about it? What can **we** do about it?
6. Anti-LGBT bias certainly is not limited to school environments. What are some examples of places and occasions outside of school in which we encounter anti-LGBT bias? How might we take action in those situations?

**Part 7 – PEER EDUCATION: Tactics for Reducing the Use of Anti-LGBT Language in Our School (15-25 minutes)** *Breaking into small groups is optional, if safety and respect can be maintained without teacher facilitation.*

Have the students brainstorm tactics they can use to bring visibility to the issue of anti-LGBT language and reduce its presence in your school. Ask for a volunteer recorder to write down everyone’s ideas on the board or a large sheet of paper.

**Examples of tactics could include:**

- sharing what they’ve learned from the articles and their research in conversations with other members of the school community, friends and family
- submitting their reflective writings and bias journal research findings to the school newspaper
- writing letters to school administrators describing their research findings and requesting school-wide training to raise awareness of anti-LGBT bias and learn strategies for reducing it
- creating posters that display their research findings along with statistics on anti-LGBT harassment from GLSEN’s 2001 National School Climate Survey (you can find it on GLSEN’s website at [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org))
- starting a gay-straight alliance (GSA) or similar social justice/anti-bias school group (you can direct interested students to the “Students and GSAs/Student Resources” section of [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org))

Once students have generated a list of 5-10 ideas, have the group come to a consensus about 3 of the tactics. Ask for volunteers to organize the tactics that require group planning and participation. Depending on your school climate, you could require that all students contribute to implementing the peer education tactics, in order to convey that community service is an integral part of education.

**The History of “Faggot”****Handout #1 (Version A)**

Many people are aware that the word “faggot” – like the French *fagot* and Italian *fa(n)gotto* – refers to a bunch of sticks, herbs, or metal rods tied together into a bundle, but what’s the connection between a bundle of sticks and anti-gay harassment???

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “faggot” has been used in a wide variety of contexts since the 1300s. At first it was a neutral term, simply referring to a bundle of sticks or twigs that someone might gather for fuel. Eventually, however, it acquired several different negative connotations, while retaining its basic origin as a bundle of sticks. When heretics were burned alive during the European Inquisitions, the fires used to burn them were built with a “faggot” (s). The expression “to fry a faggot” came to mean “to be burnt alive.” Heretics often were forced to carry the “faggot” to the fire being built for them, and those who recanted their heretical beliefs in order to avoid execution were obliged to wear the design of a faggot embroidered on their sleeve, to identify them as former heretics. “Faggot” thus also acquired the connotation of baggage, something burdensome or difficult to bear. This particular meaning evolved as a sexist insult, often directed with contempt at women considered shrewish, tiresome, or disreputable; a contemporary parallel would be “ball and chain.”

The use of the word “faggot” to refer to men who are gay or perceived to be so is primarily a U.S. phenomenon, although linked to a 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century practice in British all-male boarding schools. Younger students were expected to gather bundles of sticks to fuel the fireplaces in older students’ rooms. This practice was extended to include all sorts of tasks older students could demand of younger students, including sex. Being someone’s “faggot” came to mean occupying a submissive position, and the submissive position forced upon younger students often left them vulnerable to unwelcome sexual advances.

“Faggot” first appeared in the U.S. during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a slang term for men considered to be effeminate or flamboyant. The term grew more popular as well as more venomous during the middle of the century, and by the 1960s had become one of the most common slurs used against gay men, or men perceived to be gay. It is unclear exactly when “faggot” came to be embraced as an all-purpose insult, but that usage no doubt derives from the belief among some straight men that the greatest possible humiliation is to be identified as gay.

Other definitions for the noun “faggot” throughout history have included a type of meat pastry produced in the U.K.; a person temporarily employed to fill a deficiency in a company or military regiment’s ranks; a type of vote in the British Parliament; and thinly sliced pieces or frayed edges. “Fag” is British slang for a cigarette. The verb form of “faggot” meant to tie or bind up as in a “faggot” of sticks, but also was used figuratively to refer to binding, stitching, or fastening objects, ideas or people together. A rare use of the verb form of “faggot” referred to the act of setting the accused heretic on the fire for burning. “To faggot” also came to mean “to recant,” referring to the “faggot” design former heretics were forced to display on their clothing.

There have been many debates about the relationship of the definitions described above to contemporary anti-gay harassment. Some people believe that current usage of the term “faggot” derives more specifically from the history of burning heretics, suggesting that LGBT people or people perceived to be LGBT were included in the condemned. Others believe that the current usage of the term “faggot” derives more specifically from the history of abusing women, especially women considered less desirable. Either way, it is clear that “faggot” is the product of a long legacy of violence and sexism, and carries the pain of that legacy even when used as a general insult.

**The History of “Faggot”****Handout #1 (Version B)**

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

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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* men. Since many people are biased against LGBT people, being called “faggot” is the biggest 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 “Dyke”****Handout #2 (Version A)**

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “dyke” is a very old word, referring to a variety of ditches, trenches, pits, caves, pools, fences, embankments, dams, piers, causeways, fissures, faults, and barriers. In Geology, a “dyke” is a mass of mineral matter that fills a hole in a rock formation. None of these definitions seems to connect, however, to the contemporary usage of “dyke” as a slur directed at lesbian women or women perceived to be lesbian.

According to the “Electric Pride” website, one theory about the origin of the word “dyke” as an anti-lesbian slur suggests that “dyke” derived from the word “hermaphrodite.”

“Hermaphrodite” is a scientific term that originated from the Greek *hermaphroditos*, and entered the English lexicon in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It has been used to describe plants and animals born with some degree of ambiguity regarding their primary and/or secondary sex characteristics.

Recently, the word “intersexed” has come into preferred usage, since the word “hermaphrodite” is considered to be misleading and stigmatizing, especially by those so identified and their allies. “Hermaphrodite” continues to be widely used in the medical profession, however.

At some point which is difficult to identify, popular usage transformed the word “hermaphrodite” into “morphodite” and “morphodike.” It has been suggested that “dyke” is an abbreviation of “morphodike,” illustrating the stereotype that all lesbian women display masculine traits, dress in a typically masculine fashion, or would prefer to be men.

Another possibility for the origin of the word “dyke” in this context is that it comes from the colloquial “dike” meaning “to overdress” or “to wear fancy clothes.” The expression “diked out” is similar to the more popular “decked out”; both have meant “to get dressed up” since the 1840s. Related to this usage of “dike” were “bulldike” and “bulldyking,” both of which were popular expressions among African Americans in the 1920s, and referred to getting dressed up. It is unclear exactly when the term “dyke” acquired the undertone of deep hostility that it now often expresses.

The other main theory about the origin of the word “dyke” as an anti-lesbian slur connects to early British history. Boudicca (pronounced “*bou-dikka*”) was a chieftain/queen in the Iceni tribe in Britain during the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. The Iceni were a Celtic/British tribe in the area now called Norfolk and Suffolk. 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 an armed revolt against the Roman occupation, and razed the Roman settlement at London. The Romans countered the attack and slaughtered many Celts/Britons. Boudicca died in 62 C.E., possibly by killing herself in order to avoid being led through the streets of Rome by her triumphant Roman captors.

From the above explanations, it is clear that the usage of “dyke” to refer to lesbians or women perceived to be lesbian is rooted in a history of women transgressing their assigned gender roles. By behaving in ways that were considered to be unwomanly, women were often labeled as “dyke”s. In addition, it commonly has been assumed that women identify as lesbian out of a desire to be men. Such an assumption bespeaks an overly simplistic understanding of gender identity and gender expression, and their relationship to sexual orientation.

**The History of “Dyke”****Handout #2 (Version B)**

“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.

According to the “Electric Pride” website, 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. “Hermaphrodite” comes from the Greek *hermaphroditos*, and entered the English language in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. 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.

Another possibility for the origin of the word “dyke” is that it comes from “dike,” a common term from the mid-1800s which meant “to wear fancy clothes.” “To get diked out” was similar to our current expression “To get decked out.” It is unclear exactly when the term “dyke” transformed from simple slang to hostile slur.

Finally, early British history provides a theory about the origin of the word “dyke.” Boudicca (pronounced “*bou-dikka*”) was a chieftain/queen in the Iceni tribe in Britain during the 1<sup>st</sup> 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’ve refused to conform to society’s expectations of them often have been labeled as “dyke”s, whether or not they’ve identified as lesbians.

**Excerpted from: *Navy Photo Shows Anti-Gay Slur on Bomb*****Handout #3**Randy Dotinga, PlanetOut.com Network **Friday, October 12, 2001**

After complaints from gay organizations, the Associated Press today withdrew a news photograph that showed misspelled graffiti -- "high jack this fags" -- on an airborne bomb bound for Afghanistan.

The photograph, taken on the USS Enterprise, shows a Navy officer scrawling a message on a bomb attached to the wing of an attack plane. The AP, which provides news content to nearly every daily newspaper in the United States, distributed the photo on Thursday without a warning about its content.

It was not immediately clear if any newspapers chose to run the photograph, but it did appear in Yahoo.com's news section. Late Friday afternoon, however, the AP told its clients to remove the photo from their files because it contained an "offensive slur." The AP didn't return a message requesting more information.

The move came after complaints from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), a media watchdog group, and Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN), which represents gay members of the military.

At the SLDN, legal director Sharra E. Greer blasted the military. "The United States Navy would never allow racial epithets or derogatory graffiti based on gender or religion to be scrawled on American property," Greer said in a statement. "Messages like the one presented in this photograph only reinforce the ideas of hatred and division that our nation seeks to defend against. We must not emulate the intolerance of our enemies."

After the photo was withdrawn, GLAAD spokeswoman Cathy Renna said the photo should lead to a larger discussion. "Hiding the picture really does a disservice to the issue. It's clear that a number of people in the Navy thinks it's OK to write 'fag' on a piece of government property and drop it on a terrorist. That's something we should be talking about."

"Many of us in the media aren't instinctively questioning the bigotry because in so many peoples' eyes, using the word 'fag' or 'faggot' isn't a social problem or something to be otherwise examined," said Eric Hegedus, a photo editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer and board member of the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association.

**Excerpted from: *Navy Calls Bomb Message 'Inappropriate'***Randy Dotinga, PlanetOut.com Network **Friday, October 19, 2001**

The U.S. Navy didn't exactly apologize, but it did please gay organizations by announcing that it's acting to prevent sailors from writing "inappropriate" messages on bombs bound for Afghanistan.

The AP, which distributes stories and content to hundreds of American newspapers, withdrew the photo, which showed a Navy officer scrawling an anti-gay message on a bomb, on Oct. 12 after receiving complaints. At least one newspaper, the London Metro, ran the photo, which was released a day earlier. It remains on the Internet at Yahoo News.

Excerpted from: ***Navy Calls Bomb Message 'Inappropriate' (continued)***

The Navy told its commanders this week to make sure that no such incidents happen again, wrote Rear Admiral S. R. Pietropaoli in an Oct. 17 letter to the Human Rights Campaign, a gay advocacy group.

Pietropaoli didn't directly apologize but said the message on the bomb was "inappropriate." He added that while there's no Defense Department policy on what can be written on bombs, "we do, however, expect oversight and leadership on the scene to ensure such actions are appropriate. ...The U.S. Navy does not tolerate discrimination of any kind."

In e-mail discussions, some observers scoffed at the statement and said it's ironic because the military frowns on gays and lesbians.

However, representatives of the Human Rights Campaign and the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network said they're happy with the Navy's response to the photo.

"The letter was a welcome clarification, and we are pleased the Navy has stated that this type of anti-gay behavior has no place in our armed forces," said HRC Executive Director Elizabeth Birch in a statement.