

Bring digital literacy education into your classroom



Lesson plan: Just a joke?

Helping youth respond to casual prejudice.

Created in partnership with:



Grades: 6-8

Duration: 1 hour

Overview

One of the barriers to youth pushing back against prejudice is not wanting to over-react, particularly if they feel their peers were just 'joking around.' Humour, however, can often be a cover for intentional bullying and prejudice. In this lesson, students analyze media representations of relational aggression, such as sarcasm and put-down humour, then consider the ways in which digital communication may make it harder to recognize irony or satire and easier to hurt someone's feelings without knowing it. Students then consider how humour may be used to excuse prejudice and discuss ways of responding to it.

Learning outcomes

Students will:

- Understand how certain elements of media contribute to its meaning
- Analyze the social and political implications of media
- Recognize and identify irony, sarcasm and satire
- Understand how we can hurt others with our words, even without meaning to
- Analyze how digital communication can inhibit empathy
- Learn techniques to improve online communication and reduce conflict
- Create an emoji designed to promote a kinder online community
- Reflect on their learning and work

Preparation and materials

- Prepare to show the video **Cyrano de Bergerac: The Insult scene**
- Optional: If you're unable to show the scene, distribute the handout **Cyrano de Bergerac: The Insult Scene** (page 10)
- Prepare to distribute the handout **A History of Emoji** (page 7-9)
- Prepare to distribute the assignment sheet **Heart, Smile, Wink** (page 11)

Procedure

The Insult Scene

Begin by telling students they're going to watch a scene from **Cyrano de Bergerac**, a famous play. Tell them to look for clues that suggest how Cyrano feels about his nose.

If you're unable to show the scene, show or distribute the handout **The Insult Scene** and have students read through it (page 10). (Since nearly all of the lines are Cyrano's, it will work better to have each student read one section of the speech rather than have a single student read Cyrano.)

When students have watched or read the scene, ask them how they think Cyrano feels about his nose. If he does like his nose, why is he angry at Valvert (the man who insulted him)? If he doesn't like his nose, why does he make jokes about it?

After students have discussed this question for a few minutes, tell them you're going to show the scene again and tell them to watch Cyrano's face at three particular moments:

1. When Valvert insults him at the beginning
2. After we see the girls smiling
3. When Valvert is getting in the carriage at the end

Once students have watched the scene again, ask them if they have changed their opinion on how Cyrano feels about his nose. (If you read the scene instead of watching the clip, draw students' attention to the contrast in tone between the middle of the speech and the last few lines.)

Now ask

Whose "side" is the movie (or scene) on? In other words, how can you tell which character you're supposed to like and which you're not? Ask students to think about:

- Which character gets the best lines?
- Which character gets to speak uninterrupted?
- Which character seems to "win" the scene?

If you watched the scene, you may wish to screen it one more time to help students spot the following:

- Whose face do we see the most?
- When the camera moves, who does it follow?
- When the camera cuts away from the main action, what do we see? (Two women smile appreciatively at Cyrano; Valvert's friend looks uncomfortable.)
- How does the audience in the film respond? (They laugh at Cyrano's insulting himself.) Point out to students that because we only hear the laughter, without seeing anyone laughing, it blurs the line between the audience in the film and the audience watching the film. The crowd also applauds Cyrano when he chases Valvert to the carriage.

Now ask students:

If the film is on Cyrano's side, why do we spend so much time listening to insults of him? Is there a difference between insulting yourself and being insulted by someone else?

Irony, sarcasm and satire

After students have discussed this for a few minutes, explain that one meaning of the term **irony** is when the apparent meaning of something is different from its real meaning. How does the difference between insulting yourself and being insulted make the scene ironic? (Instead of getting mad at Valvert's insult, Cyrano exerts his superiority over Valvert by showing that he's much better at making fun of himself).

Tell students that two concepts similar to irony are **sarcasm** (basically, when irony is used to insult someone) and **satire** (when irony is used to poke fun at an idea or a group of people).

- Are there examples of sarcasm in this scene? (The whole speech could be seen as sarcasm, but the best example is the double meaning of "letters" near the end.)
- Are there examples of satire in this scene? (When Valvert describes Cyrano as not having "even a pair of gloves," the scene is making fun of people like Valvert who value looks and possessions over more meaningful qualities.)

(If your class enjoys trivia, you can tell them that Cyrano is not just an example of irony but the definition of it: the Greek word *eironeia* means a clownish character in a comedy who outwits more sophisticated characters.)

Now ask, how can you tell when someone is being ironic or sarcastic, and when they're being sincere? Make sure that the ideas of facial expression and tone of voice are raised, and point out that the context of a situation is important as well – we know that Cyrano's insults of himself are ironic and that his insults of Valvert are sincere because the scene wouldn't make sense for Cyrano otherwise.

Have students brainstorm examples of movies or TV shows where sarcasm or insults are used for humour, then share their examples with the class.

Now ask

- Which characters most often say mean things? Are they characters we're supposed to like? Is the show or movie on their side? (Remind students how you determined that the scene you watched was on Cyrano's side.)
- Do they often say mean things to their friends?
- Is it funny when characters say mean things to their friends?
- When people are insulted, does it seem like it hurts their feelings? (Remind students that Cyrano's last lines show his feelings were hurt by Valvert's insult.)
- How do the people around them usually react? Does anyone ever push back against a character saying mean things?
- Do students think it would hurt their feelings if their friends said mean things to them?
- What message do we get from a movie or TV show if insults and sarcasm don't seem to hurt?
- How could media makers avoid sending the message that it's okay to say mean things to people? (For example, they could show that the target's feelings were hurt; show that the person who was mean is punished for it in some way; not 'reward' the person who was mean by showing others laughing or with media elements like those analyzed in the scene.)

Tell students that even though the people in TV shows and movies are made up (or exaggerated, as with reality TV), we still think of them as at least partly real – and just like it is with our own friends, how they act can influence how we act in real life.

Now ask

- Do people they know sometimes use mean or offensive words? (A study of one school found that six in ten students used the word ‘gay’ as a general negative word – to describe something they don’t like – at least once a day.)
- Why do people do that? (Sometimes just to be mean or to bully people, but also to seem cool, to show they don’t care what people think about them, because other people they know use those words, or because they don’t know that using a word like “gay” or “lame” is hurtful.)
- If there are other people around, what messages do they send by how they respond to mean or offensive words? (Remind students of the crowd applauding Cyrano. If they don’t say anything, or laugh, they’re sending the signal that it’s okay to use the word.)
- Can words still hurt your feelings if they weren’t meant to? (In the same school study, 76% of students agreed that hearing the word “gay” used in a negative way could be hurtful, even if it had nothing to do with a person’s sexual orientation.)

Remind students about Cyrano making fun of himself, then telling Valvert, “I say these things lightly enough myself, about myself, but I allow none else to utter them.” Is it different if someone uses a hurtful or offensive word about themselves or their own group? (For example, some Indigenous people choose to use the word “Indian,” but that does not make it okay for non-Indigenous people to use it.)

Irony Online

Now ask, are people more likely to use mean or hurtful words when they’re communicating online, such as in games or on social media? Why or why not? (Remind students of the discussion on how you can tell if someone is being ironic or sarcastic.)

- Is it harder to tell if someone is joking or being sarcastic when you’re online?
- Can that make it harder to push back when people are being mean, hurtful or prejudiced online? (In MediaSmarts’ research, almost half of young Canadians said they sometimes didn’t push back against prejudice online because they weren’t sure if the person really meant it, and four in ten said they sometimes didn’t push back because they thought people were just joking around.)
- Do the same things make it harder to tell if you’ve hurt someone’s feelings when you’re online?

Summarize the discussion by saying that it’s easier to be mean to others – and harder to tell if you’ve hurt someone’s feelings – when we’re online because we’re missing important visual and social clues about how we and other people are feeling:

- You can’t see someone’s facial expression
- You can’t hear their tone of voice
- You may not feel like you’re really “there” or like the people you’re talking to are real
- You sometimes don’t know the context in which something was said
- You never know who might see what you post – so other people might not understand the context

Icons and Irony

Distribute the article **A history of emoji** (page 7-9) and have students read it and answer the questions. Discuss the questions and answers with students:

1. Why have people needed to invent things like punctuation marks, emoticons and emojis? (To get across their feelings, which aren't always clear in writing.)
2. Why did both Wilkins and Fahlman think there needed to be a way to show irony? (Both of them communicated with their colleagues mostly by writing. It can be very hard to tell if someone is being ironic just by reading what they wrote.)
3. Why do you think Fahlman's emoticons were successful and Wilkins' irony mark wasn't? (There are a number of possible answers, but make sure to point out that unlike regular mail, the Internet is an instant network. This means messages and ideas can spread more quickly, and people can work together more directly: for example, while Fahlman's idea of emoticons was adopted, other people acted as online collaborators in deciding to use the 'winky' to show irony, not the emoticon that Fahlman has suggested for that purpose.)
4. Fahlman also suggested using a mark to show that something wasn't ironic. Why do you think people didn't use this one? (There are a number of possible answers, but make sure to point out that using one would mean you couldn't later suggest that you were kidding or being ironic.)
5. What is "Poe's law"? Do you think it's true? Why or why not? (Poe's law is the idea that it's impossible to tell whether someone is being ironic or not online without some added clue, like an emoji or a "jk".)
6. Is it always clear what people mean by emojis? Can you think of times when you weren't sure what someone meant? (If students don't think of any examples, ask them about the 'rolling eyes' emoji: 🙄. Does it mean that you're annoyed? That you're skeptical? Is it always clear who or what the person using it is annoyed at, or skeptical about?)
7. Do people sometimes use emojis to make it look like they were "just kidding" when they say something mean or hurtful? Does this change how it feels? Is it harder to push back against a mean comment if someone says they were just kidding or uses an emoji to make it look like they're kidding?

Group exercise: “Not kidding” emoji

After students have discussed the last question, have them help you design an emoji that would mean “I’m serious” or “I’m not kidding”, like Fahlman’s “not joking” emoticon. The purpose of this emoji would be to make it clear that you’re not being sarcastic or making fun of someone.

Draw the new emoji on the board or a piece of chart paper (or have a student draw it) following the class’s suggestions. Make sure they consider:

- How can you get across the idea that you’re not kidding?
- Does it make more sense to use a facial expression emoji (like a smiley or winky) or something else (like the thumbs up or fire emoji)?
- How can you make it clear that you mean this and not something else?

Assessment Task: heart, smile, wink

Distribute the assignment sheet **heart, smile, wink** (page 11) and tell students that they’ll be designing another new emoji. This emoji should communicate a feeling or an idea and should be usable for one of four things:

1. To avoid accidentally hurting someone’s feelings
2. To keep a misunderstanding from turning into a fight
3. To push back when someone says something mean or offensive
4. Or to comfort someone who’s been the target of a mean or offensive comment

The emoji could be used either when you’re saying something, when you’re responding to something, or after something has happened.

Students may either start with the circle (to draw a facial expression emoji) or draw something freehand on a blank sheet of paper.

If you choose, you can let students brainstorm with a partner or a group before choosing the purpose of their emoji.

If any students have problems thinking of an idea, you can suggest:

- An emoji that means “Did you really mean that?”
- An emoji to tell someone that you think what they said wasn’t cool
- An emoji to tell someone that you’re on their side
- An emoji to tell someone that you think what happened to them wasn’t okay
- An emoji to tell people who are arguing to take a breath and step away
- An emoji to tell people to take the conversation offline

When students have completed their emoji, have them write a few sentences explaining the purpose of the emoji, why they think it’s needed, and how their choices communicate it.

Handout: A history of emoji

Do you use emojis? If so, you're one of the three billion people around the world who do. But you might not know that emojis are just the latest solution to a problem that goes back thousands of years.



Tell me how you feel

Writing may be the #1 invention of all time. It helps us remember things and lets us explore other people's minds and imaginary worlds. People can even read stone carvings and clay tablets that were written more than **7,000 years ago!**

But there is one problem with writing: it tells you what the writer means, but not how they feel. According to language expert Vyvyan Evans, "60 to 70% of our emotional expression comes not from language itself, but from verbal cues: eye gaze, tone of voice, gesture and facial expression. We humans use 43 muscles in our face to produce in excess of 10,000 distinct expressions that reflect all kinds of emotions."

People have tried a lot of ways to get feelings across in writing, and two of the most successful attempts are ones you already know: the **question mark (?)** and **exclamation mark (!)**, which were invented in the Middle Ages, that tell you how to read a sentence.

A few hundred years later, an English scientist named John Wilkins suggested adding a mark to show that you were being **ironic**. Wilkins was a pretty good inventor: he was the first person to figure out how to get honey from a beehive without killing the bees. But his irony mark – an upside-down exclamation point (¡) – didn't catch on. (You probably already guessed that.)

A history of emoji continued: OK Computer

One reason why Wilkins wanted an irony mark was because in his time, scientists (and other people) mostly spoke to each other by writing letters as there was no other way to send a message over a long distance. When the telephone and electronic media were invented, things improved - you still couldn't see someone's face, but at least you could hear their tone of voice.

In the 1980s, scientists started using the Internet, though at the time, it was just a network that connected computers at a few universities. They quickly found that it was hard to tell whether or not someone was being serious, and after a joke about a chemical spill led to all of the elevators in one university being shut down, a computer scientist named Scott Fahlman made this suggestion:

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19-Sep-82 11:44    Scott E Fahlman    :-)  
From: Scott E Fahlman <Fahlman at Cmu-20c>
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I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers:

:-)

Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends.

For this, use :- (

:-) :- (;-)

A history of emoji continued: Text to pictures

Unlike Wilkins' irony mark, or the many similar marks suggested in between, Fahlman's were very successful. These emoticons (emotion icons) were soon joined by others, used to show different emotions, and the mark Fahlman thought should show irony – what we today call the “smiley,” written like this :-) – was used to show happiness instead. A new emoticon – the “winky” that used a semicolon instead of a colon for the eyes – took its place to represent irony.

More than 20 years later, emoticons became graphic when Shigetaka Kurita, an engineer at Japan's biggest phone company, invented emoji (emotion + kanji, Japanese for “letter.”) Kurita later said that he “found inspiration in pictograms, manga and all sorts of other sources.” Even if he wasn't thinking about Fahlman's emoticons, it didn't take long for them to become emoji – including the ironic “winky.” As phones got bigger screens and better graphics, emojis took over from emoticons, and today if you type a smiley or winky your phone will probably turn it into that emoji automatically.

Today, the internet has grown to something that Fahlman and his colleagues probably couldn't have imagined, and emojis are a key part of how we talk to each other online. Not surprisingly, almost all of the most frequently used emojis are ones like smileys, hearts, hand gestures – and winkies – that help get our feelings across. In fact, one of the most commonly named “rules” of the internet is **Poe's law** – the idea that **without** an emoticon or emoji, it's impossible to tell whether someone is being serious or ironic online.

Questions (answer on separate paper)

1. Why have people needed to invent things like punctuation marks, emoticons and emojis?
2. Why did both Wilkins and Fahlman think there needed to be a way to show irony?
3. Why do you think Fahlman's emoticons were successful and Wilkins' irony mark wasn't?
4. Fahlman also suggested using a mark to show that something **wasn't** ironic. Why do you think people didn't use this one?
5. What is “Poe's law”? Do you think it's true? Why or why not?
6. Is it always clear what people mean by emojis? Can you think of times when you weren't sure what someone meant?
7. Do people sometimes use emojis to make it look like they were “just kidding” when they say something mean or hurtful? Does this change how it feels? Is it harder to push back against a mean comment if someone says they were just kidding?

The Insult Scene (from “Cyrano de Bergerac” by: Edmond Rostand)

VALVERT Observe! I myself will proceed to put him in his place. (Walking up to Cyrano.)
Ah your nose... um... Your nose is... rather large!

CYRANO Is that all?

VALVERT Oh... well...

CYRANO Ah, no, young sir! You are too simple. Why, you might have said a great many things! Why waste your opportunity? For example, thus:

Aggressive: I, sir, if that nose were mine, I'd have it amputated on the spot!

Friendly: How do you drink with such a nose? You ought to have a cup made specially!

Descriptive: 'Tis a rock, a cliff, a cape. A cape? Say rather, a peninsula!

Inquisitive: What is that container? A backpack or a briefcase on your face?

Kindly: Ah, do you love the little birds so much that you give them this to perch on?

Cautious: Take care, a weight like that might make you top-heavy!

Scientific: I have heard of a creature called the Snuffleupagus. I never thought I'd see a real one!

Poetic: When it blows, the typhoon howls, and the clouds darken.

Dramatic: When it bleeds, the Red Sea!

Epic: Hark! A mighty horn calls the Vikings to battle!

Simple: When do they unveil the monument?

Respectful: Sir, I recognize in you a man of parts, a man of prominence.

Rustic: (In Southern accent) Call that a nose? That's no nose, I tell you what. Where ah come from that's called a cucumber!

Or as Faustus said in the play: O, that this too, too solid nose should melt!

These, my dear sir, are things you might have said had you any bit of learning or of wit. But of wit you never had an atom and of learning not a letter.

Moreover if you had the invention to make a jest of me be sure you would not live to speak the twentieth part of half a syllable of the beginning!

For I say these things lightly enough myself, about myself, but I allow none else to utter them.

Assignment: Heart, smile, wink

For this assignment, you will be designing a new emoji, like the “not kidding” emoji we designed in class. Your emoji should communicate a feeling or an idea and be used for one of four things:

1. To avoid accidentally hurting someone’s feelings
2. To keep a misunderstanding from turning into a fight
3. To push back when someone says something mean or offensive
4. Or to comfort someone who’s been the target of a mean or offensive comment

The emoji could be used either when you’re saying something, when you’re responding to something, or after something has happened.

You may either start with a circle (to draw a facial expression emoji) or draw something freehand on a blank sheet of paper.

Make sure to consider:

- How can you get across the idea visually?
- Does it make more sense to use a facial expression emoji (like a smiley or winky) or some other visual (like the thumbs up or fire emoji)?
- How can you ensure your emoji relays a clear message and that people won’t mistake what it means?

When you’ve finished your emoji, write a paragraph explaining it. Your paragraph should include:

- What feeling or idea your emoji is communicating
- How you tried to get that feeling or idea across in your design
- Why your emoji is needed to help people communicate online



Category	Learning expectations	Achievement
<p>Use</p>	<p>Ethics and empathy Demonstrate a knowledge of the appropriate strategies for sharing and expressing feelings and emotions online.</p> <p>Demonstrate understanding of the difference between being a passive bystander and an active intervener.</p> <p>Making and remixing Use digital media tools to effectively communicate meaning and purpose.</p>	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>
<p>Understand</p>	<p>Ethics and empathy Understand the dynamics of online cruelty and how it affects all of the people involved.</p> <p>Community engagement Demonstrate understanding what it means to be responsible to and respectful of his/her offline and online communities as a way to learn how to be a good digital citizen.</p> <p>Making and remixing Understand how meaning is produced through media and how culture is produced through the internet and social media in particular.</p> <p>Show an understanding of the forms and techniques of the medium and genre:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the chosen topic, issue and solution were clear • the product displayed an insight into a topic and opinion 	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>
<p>Create</p>	<p>Community engagement Make a positive contribution to one's online or offline community.</p> <p>Making and remixing Effectively apply the forms and techniques of the medium and genre.</p> <p>Communicate information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using a variety of media and formats.</p>	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>