

LESSON PLAN

Behaving Ethically Online: Ethics and Empathy

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.



LEVEL: Grade 4 to 6

DURATION: 1-2 hours

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts

Overview

In this lesson, students are introduced to the idea that “hot” emotional states can make it harder for them to control how they act. They also discuss the concept of empathy and look at how digital communication can make it harder to feel empathy for other people. Students then read scenarios that portray two sides of an online conflict and consider how to resolve them, using their discussion to build a list of tools for emotional management and conflict resolution online. Finally, students create their own scenario and explain how it could be resolved.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- learn to identify “hot” emotional states and their effects on decision-making
- practice extending empathy to the online context
- identify differences between online and offline communication
- explore moral dilemmas relating to online communication
- learn skills for managing emotions during online interactions
- practice preventing and managing conflict during online interactions

Preparation and Materials

- Prepare to distribute the following handouts:
 - *What Do Hot Emotions Feel Like?*
 - *Staying Out of Empathy Traps*
 - *Ethics and Empathy Online*
- Prepare to show the video [Empathy and Community](#)
- Prepare to distribute the assignment sheet *Seeing Both Sides of the Screen*.
- You may wish to review MediaSmarts' [online articles](#) on cyberbullying.



Procedure

WHAT DO HOT EMOTIONS FEEL LIKE?

Start by asking students to write down on a piece of paper three things people have done that have made them happy recently and three that have made them mad. (These can be either online or offline.)

Tell them to think back to those moments and try to remember how they *felt*: how long did they stay angry or happy? What did feeling that way make them do? What did it make them *want* to do? (These questions are for students to reflect on, not for sharing with the class.)

Tell students that happiness and anger are examples of “hot” emotions that can be hard to control and can make us do things we normally wouldn’t.

Ask students to name some other “hot” emotions (examples might include fear, excitement, frustration and jealousy).

Ask students:

- Do we always know when we’re feeling these hot emotions?
- What might be some times when we’re feeling them without realizing it?

For example, if we get scared, that fear doesn’t stop right away even when the thing we were scared of does – or even if it turns out that it wasn’t really scary.

Project or distribute the handout *What Do Hot Emotions Feel Like?* and ask students:

- How do we feel when we’re happy or excited?
- What are the ways our body shows that we’re feeling a hot emotion?

Have students identify on the image how hot emotions feel in different parts of our bodies, for example:

Head: Hot emotions can give you a headache or make you feel light-headed

Jaw: Your jaw might clench when you feel hot emotions

Shoulders: You might feel tension in your shoulders or neck

Chest: You might find yourself holding your breath

Heart: Your heart beats faster when feeling hot emotions

Stomach: You may feel nauseous or have an upset stomach

Hands: Your hands might be itchy or sweaty, or you might make a fist without knowing it

Now have students turn the handout over and read through the second page. Have each student take thirty seconds or a minute to practice doing a “body scan.”

EMPATHY TRAPS

Ask students if they know what the word “empathy” means. Explain that it actually has two meanings – *feeling* what other people feel (like when you get sad because something bad happens to your friend) and *recognizing* how other people feel (like when you’re able to tell your friend is angry even if she doesn’t say anything).

What are the clues that tell us how someone is feeling?

Ask students to remember a time they knew that a friend was mad and think about *how* they knew that:

- the look on their face;
- the tone of their voice;
- their body language (tense, hunched, etc.);
- if they seem to be preoccupied with something.

What are some things that might happen if we don’t realize that we are, or someone we’re with is, in a hot emotional state?

- We can do things without thinking about them;
- react differently to things than we otherwise would;
- provoke a reaction in someone that they otherwise wouldn’t have.

Start a chart on the board with the headings OFFLINE and ONLINE. Ask students how talking to people online (through things like video games, social networks, texting and instant messaging) is different from talking to people face-to-face. Make sure to include the following points:

OFFLINE	ONLINE
We can see them	We can't see them
We can hear their tone of voice	We can't hear them
They can see you	They can't see you
They can hear you	They can't hear you
Things you say disappear (except in memory)	Everything you say can be read later
Only people who are there hear you	People can read what you say
We can see how people react to what we say	We don't see how people react to what we say

Remind students of the ways that we can tell if someone else is in a hot emotional state: which of these do we have when we're online, and which don't we have? How might this affect how we respond to things that make us feel hot emotions when we're online?

Now show the video [Empathy and Community](#), then distribute the handout *Staying Out of Empathy Traps* and go through it with the class.

Distribute the handout *Ethics and Empathy Online*. Read the scenarios on Side A and then have students discuss the following questions as a class about each one:

- How would you feel in this situation?
- What would you do to resolve this situation?
- Who would be affected by what you do?

Have students form pairs and read the scenarios on Side B (on the other side of the page). Each of these scenarios revisits a scenario from Side A from another point of view.

After they have read each one, students consider the same three questions. When students have completed their work on these scenarios take them up as a class, and ask the students if they would change any of their answers from side A based on what they now know. Discuss the students' solutions to the scenarios and which strategies they think would be most likely to work.



ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

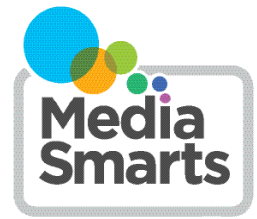
Distribute the assignment sheet *Seeing Both Sides of the Screen* and tell students that they are now going to create a similar scenario involving two characters (e.g., in a group chat, social media comment section, or video game) where conflict is caused by the absence of non-verbal cues (tone, face, body language) or the immediate, emotional nature of the online environment (the “empathy trap”). As with the scenarios they read, they should write the scenario from both perspectives. Students should then propose and explain a solution that avoids escalating the conflict and resolves the misunderstanding. The resolution must include at least two techniques from the *Staying Out of Empathy Traps* handout.

CONSOLIDATION

One day after the lesson, have students take thirty seconds to write down as many signs as they can remember that tell us we are feeling a “hot” emotion.

A week after the lesson, have students take a minute to write down the things that they find have worked best to help them cool down when feeling “hot” emotions.

These activities can be done as “bell ringers” at the beginning of class or as “exit tickets” at the end of one.



BEHAVING ETHICALLY ONLINE: ETHICS AND EMPATHY

Ethics and Empathy Online

SIDE A

Scenario 1:

Even though they've never met offline, Nathan and Jeremy are best friends who spend a lot of time playing Realms of Chivalry together online. They have a lot of fun fighting monsters as well as joking together and teasing each other. When they meet a War Hound, a kind of giant dog, Jeremy runs away instead of fighting it and asks Nathan to leave it alone too. Nathan wants the War Hound's treasure so he fights it and makes fun of Jeremy, saying he's sorry that Jeremy was so scared of the little puppy dog. Jeremy doesn't say anything but a few minutes later his character attacks Nathan's, and after the two fight for a while both of them log out of Realms of Chivalry. Nathan doesn't understand why Jeremy got so mad.

- How would you feel if you were Nathan?
- What would you do to resolve this situation?
- Who would be affected by what you do?

Scenario 2:

Ella likes to play with Sky Giants, action figures that come with codes that let you control that character in the Sky Giants virtual world. One afternoon while playing with her friends online she sees that Oscar, a classmate of hers, is being teased for playing a female giant called Valorica. She and Oscar aren't really close friends but Ella doesn't like to see anybody being

bullied, so she tells the other players to leave Oscar alone and that there's nothing wrong with playing a female character – it's just a game, after all. To her surprise, though, Oscar gets mad and tells Ella to leave him alone.

- How would you feel if you were Ella?
- What would you do to resolve this situation?
- Who would be affected by what you do?

Scenario 3:

Maria is checking her social networking page when she notices that she's getting a lot of weird comments on a photo that's been tagged with her name:

"Nice hair"

"Tintin lives"

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

She finds out that her friend Jennifer posted a photo of the two of them in which Maria's hair is standing up in the front. Maria doesn't even remember when the picture was taken and she definitely didn't want it to be posted! She feels especially mad because she doesn't know of any reason why Jennifer would be so mean to her.

- How would you feel if you were Maria?
- What would you do to resolve this situation?
- Who would be affected by what you do?

SIDE B

Scenario 1:

Jeremy lives on a street where there aren't any other kids to play with, so he spends a lot of time playing Realms of Chivalry. He's made some good friends like Nathan, but they don't talk much about their offline lives. When he's offline, he spends a lot of time with his dog Gus. A few weeks ago Gus started getting sick and Jeremy is very worried about him. He knows it's silly, but he didn't want to fight with the War Hound on Realms of Chivalry and when Nathan fought with it he felt like he was going to cry. He knows he was wrong to get mad at Nathan but he's afraid that Nathan will make fun of him if Nathan finds out why he was upset.

- How would you feel if you were Jeremy?
- What would you do to resolve this situation?
- Who would be affected by what you do?
- Does this change how you felt about this story when you heard it from Nathan's point of view?

SCENARIO 2:

All of Oscar's friends have Sky Giants, but his mother says she just can't afford to buy him such an expensive toy. One day his mother brings home a surprise: someone she works with has a daughter who quit playing Sky Giants and gave away her Valorica figure. Oscar's friends tease him a lot when they play, but it's better than not playing at all. He makes a joke out of it because he doesn't want his friends to know his mother couldn't afford to buy him a new Sky Giant

toy. One day Ella, a girl from his class that he doesn't usually play with, starts yelling at his friends to stop bullying him. He doesn't want to have to explain why he plays Valorica. It's so embarrassing!

- How would you feel if you were Oscar?
- What would you do to resolve this situation?
- Who would be affected by what you do?
- Does this change how you felt about this story when you heard it from Ella's point of view?

SCENARIO 3:

Jennifer is looking at the pictures she took on her phone and deciding which ones to post. She finds one of herself that she thinks looks really good but her friend Maria is also in it, with her hair standing up in a way that makes her look silly. She knows that Maria will be upset if anyone they know sees the picture. Because she and Maria have a lot of the same friends, she knows that if she posts it people will see Maria in it and tag it with her name so that everyone she knows will see it. If Jennifer doesn't post it, though, none of her friends will see it.

- How would you feel if you were Jennifer?
- What would you do to resolve this situation?
- Who would be affected by what you do?
- Does this change how you felt about this story when you heard it from Maria's point of view?

BEHAVING ETHICALLY ONLINE: ETHICS AND EMPATHY

What Do Hot Emotions Feel Like?

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What are the ways our body shows that we're feeling a hot emotion?

Think about times you have been angry, scared or worried.

How did that feel in different parts of your body?



Try doing a “body scan” right now.

Close your eyes and focus on the different parts of your body. Start with the top of your head and then your face, your neck and shoulders. Move slowly all the way down to your toes.

Pay attention to what you're feeling in each part of your body. Is your jaw tense? Is your heart racing? Are you holding your breath? Do you feel hot?



BEHAVING ETHICALLY ONLINE: ETHICS AND EMPATHY

What Can You Do When You Feel Hot Emotions?

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When we feel those “hot” emotions, we can do things without thinking about them; react differently to things than we otherwise would; and provoke a reaction in someone that they otherwise wouldn’t have.

It’s okay to feel angry or upset – but you don’t want that feeling to control you.

It’s hard to think clearly when we’re feeling a “hot” emotion like fear or anger.

Doing something physical, like going outside, drawing something, cooking, or playing a musical instrument will help.

If you feel the signs of a hot emotion, try this:

Take one slow, deep breath.

Then name three things around you that you can:

- See
- Smell
- Hear
- and Feel.

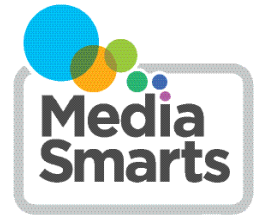
Next, take three more slow, deep breaths.

Make sure to take at least an hour – before you respond to anything that made you angry or upset.

In that time, you can try one or more of these ways of “shifting” your mood:

- Getting exercise or going outside
- Listening to music
- Snuggling with a pet
- Smelling or tasting (or cooking!) something nice.

Not all of these work equally well for everyone. Find out what works for you. Then build a “toolbox” of ways to cool yourself down.



BEHAVING ETHICALLY ONLINE: ETHICS AND EMPATHY

Staying Out of Empathy Traps

Online communication (like texting, gaming, or chatting) can be tricky because you **cannot see the other person's face, hear their tone of voice, or read their body language**. Since you are missing these clues, it is easy to misunderstand what someone means, and this makes it harder to feel empathy for them.

Use these three steps to stop arguments and handle difficult situations online.

1. STOP! CHECK YOUR EMOTIONS

When something online makes you mad, scared, or excited, you are feeling a "hot" emotion. Hot emotions make it hard to think clearly or slow yourself down, so you may react strongly and personally.

Do you feel your **heart racing** or your muscles getting tense?

Are you feeling **mad, scared, or embarrassed**?

Use your toolbox let those feelings fade.

2. THINK! USE DIGITAL EMPATHY

Since you are missing the emotion cues online, you need to use take extra steps to imagine the other person's perspective.

Remember the person online is real. Try to imagine a person sitting next to you before you type or say anything.

Assume the best. Understand that what you read might be easily misinterpreted because there is no tone of voice. A harsh comment may have been meant as banter, teasing, or a joke.

Imagine how they feel. Remember that the other person can't tell how *you* are feeling either, which is why online "drama can blow up" easily.

3. ACT! CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTION

Once you're calm and have thought about the other person's point of view, pick the best way to solve the conflict.

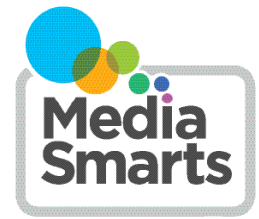
Talk face-to-face if you can. If the conflict is with a friend, talking things out in person often works better than communicating online.

Do NOT bring your friends into the fight. Asking your "posse" (friends/group) to back you up in an argument or send the same message over and over can make angry feelings more intense and turn a disagreement into a bigger conflict.

Talk to a trusted adult or friend. Having someone listen to you is one of the most effective ways of dealing with online conflict. If you can't talk to someone you know, you can turn to helplines like Kids Help Phone (www.kidshelpphone.ca).

Block or Ignore. You have control over your online experience; use protection settings within your accounts and devices to block or mute people who are hurtful.

Report harmful behavior to the game or platform.



BEHAVING ETHICALLY ONLINE: ETHICS AND EMPATHY

Seeing Both Sides of the Screen

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Your Goal: To describe a two-sided online conflict scenario like the ones we read and discussed, then show how the techniques you’ve learned can resolve it.

PART 1: WRITE THE CONFLICT (SIDE A)

In this section, you will write the initial conflict as it appears online, without showing the hidden feelings or true intentions of the characters.

Set the Scene: Choose an online place where communication happens quickly and without face-to-face clues. This could be a group chat, a social media comment section, or a video game.

Introduce the Characters: Create two characters, and decide what strong, or **“hot,” emotional state** (like anger, excitement, or frustration) they might be feeling when the conflict starts. Remember, “hot” emotions make it hard to **think clearly or slow ourselves down**.

The Misunderstanding: Write a short scene (a text conversation, comments, or dialogue) where one character writes or posts something that is misunderstood by the other character.

The Empathy Trap: The conflict must happen because the characters **cannot see the other person’s face or hear their tone of voice**. This lack of clues makes it easy for the **“drama to blow up”**.

End the Scene: End the scene with the conflict escalating or abruptly stopping (e.g., one character blocks the other or logs off being mad).

PART 2: REVEAL THE HIDDEN TRUTH (SIDE B)

Now, rewrite the story from the perspective of one or both characters involved.

Explain the Reaction: Why did the second character react the way they did? Show the reader that the character did not intend to be mean, but was acting on a different “hot” emotion or something else that made them sensitive.

Show the Impact: Explain how the **lack of context online** made the situation painful or confusing for the characters involved.

Reflect: Briefly explain how hearing the other side changes how you felt about the story.

PART 3: RESOLVE THE CONFLICT

Based on the full story (Sides A and B), show a solution that resolves the conflict without causing more drama.

Your resolution must use and explain at least **two** specific techniques from the *Staying Out of Empathy Traps* handout.

Choose Two Techniques: Select two distinct actions from the handout that the confused or angry character should take to manage the conflict:

Write the Resolution: Describe exactly what happens in your solution, ensuring you clearly explain **how** the two chosen techniques stop the conflict from escalating and help resolve the original misunderstanding.

Explain the Outcome: What did the characters learn about communicating online and respecting each other’s feelings?