

ACTIVITY 1 Source: Amnesty International UK

WORD POWER

Language shapes the way we think, the way we perceive ourselves and others and the world around us.

Ask the students in pairs to list some positive and negative ways in which words can

be used. Talk about times when others have used words which:

- have made the students feel good about themselves
- have silenced them or made them feel less good about themselves.

Ask the students in pairs to discuss an experience of being insulted or taunted:

- what happened?
- was the insult based on a real 'difference'?
- how did they feel and react at the time?
- why do they think it happened?
- what might have motivated the person or people involved?
- how would they deal with a similar situation now?

What words have they used to taunt or insult others?

Have they ever said anything that they wished they could 'unsay'?

Have they ever wished they had said something when it was too late?

Invite the students in groups to pool examples to make a common list of taunts, grouped into aspects of 'difference', eg skin colour, size, physical impairment, sexuality, not conforming to expectations, being unfashionable, etc.

The whole class can then discuss:

- What messages do these insults give about what is 'normal' and 'acceptable'?
- Where might these messages come from?
- Which aspect of 'difference' attracts most insults?

Aldous Huxley said:

'Educators have done a good deal less than they might reasonably have been expected to do in explaining to young people the nature, the limitations, the huge potentialities for evil as well as good, of that greatest of all human inventions, language. Children should be taught that words are indispensable but can also be fatal'. (Perspective 1962)

Write this on the board, and invite the whole class to discuss:

- What does he mean by 'words are indispensable but can also be fatal'?
- Can they think of examples of words being fatal?
- Is language the 'greatest of all human inventions'?

Write up these words:

'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.' (Attributed to Voltaire (1694-1778) - summary not actual quote.)

Ask groups to come up with three points in favour of the statement and three points against. Groups can then look at the list of the statements below, discuss them and rank them in order from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree':

- There are some words that are so offensive they should never be used.
- Everyone should be able to say anything they want to say.
- It is all right to say something offensive in private but not in public.
- It is better to let hateful opinions be spoken so that they can be known and challenged.
- Hate speech is more dangerous than censorship.
- Pornography is a form of hate speech.
- It is all right for someone to use an offensive word to describe themselves.
- It's equally damaging if a woman tells a sexist joke or a black person tells a racist joke.
- Politically correct language is a form of censorship.
- Principles of equality do not make money.