

What a Disaster!

Grades 4 - 6

Background

On July 10, 2011, the head of the United Nations refugee agency declared that Somalia is the “worst humanitarian disaster” in the world.¹ Drought, famine and ongoing conflict threatens the lives of over 13 million people in the Horn of Africa. A *disaster* is often defined as a tragic, natural or man-made event that often happens suddenly, is out of control and results in significant damage, destruction, hardship and loss of life. It is important that students understand that a disaster can mean different things to different people in different contexts. For instance the expression “What a disaster!” or “That was a disaster!” can have a joking connotation depending on the context in which it is said.

Students will

- develop an understanding of disasters
- understand that disasters can have different meanings to different people depending on circumstances
- compare new ideas and information to prior knowledge and experiences
- ask questions and discuss to explore ideas and understand new concepts

Materials

- Reproducible Masters *Speech Bubble* and *Disaster Statements*

Time 45 minutes

Instructions

1. Show students the *Speech Bubble* “What a disaster!” Ask students to describe what might have happened to cause someone to make this statement. Remind students there are no right or wrong answers and invite them to share their responses.
2. Write three headings on the board: “somewhat” in the centre, “least” to the left of the board and “most” to the right.
3. Organize students into the centre of the room. Read the set of *Disaster Statements*. As each statement is read, students respond by moving to the right of the room if the statement most represents their idea of “a disaster”; to the left of the room if it is least like their idea of “a disaster”; and remaining in the middle if the statement is somewhat like their idea of “a disaster”.
4. After each statement is read, place the statement card under the heading on the board that corresponds to where the majority of students are standing. Record the number of students standing in each line under the matching heading.

Discussion

- How did you decide which events were disasters and which ones were not?
- Did students agree on which statements most represented their idea of a disaster? Explain.

- What makes a disaster? *Use the following questions to prompt students if they are having difficulty responding:*
- Does it matter how many people are affected?
- Does it matter where it happens or who it happens to?
- Does it matter who knows about it?
- Does it matter what caused it?

Optional: Record student responses and use them to start a wall display about disasters. Throughout the unit ask students to add information to the display or make changes to their initial responses.

Follow-up Activities

- Examine newspaper or journal articles (online or hard copies) to find other words being used to describe the “disaster” in the Horn of Africa. Compare the meanings of the different words (e.g. emergency, crisis, and catastrophe). Discuss why journalists might use one word over the other.
- Discuss the difference between a natural and human-made disaster. Ask students to research and present a recent example of a natural or human-made disaster.

Sources:

- ^{1.} CBC News: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2011/07/10/somalia-drought-famine-un-humanitarian.html>

Reproducible Master

Speech Bubble



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Disaster Statements

Cut out the statement cards.

<p>Your town has flooded. Like thousands of other people your family has lost everything. Homes, cars, schools, parks and roads have all been damaged or washed away.</p>	<p>It's picture day. During lunch you spill chocolate milk all over your shirt – your class is next in line to have pictures taken.</p>
<p>Your house has been destroyed by fire, but your insurance will pay for all the damages.</p>	<p>It hasn't rained in months. The crops and cattle in your community have all died. Like many others, your family has no money or food left and must leave, traveling on foot to finding food and water.</p>
<p>You leave your iPod in the pocket of your jeans. Unfortunately your jeans have just gone through the wash, along with your iPod.</p>	<p>You ride your bike into your neighbour's new car, leaving a dent. There goes your allowance for the next few months.</p>
<p>The only hospital in your town is destroyed by an earthquake.</p>	<p>One of the five hospitals in your city is destroyed by an earthquake.</p>
<p>A hurricane demolishes your town. Your country's government has pledged to give money and send people to help rebuild the town.</p>	<p>You are trapped in a car after a bad accident. You are far away from any towns and there is no one else traveling on the same road.</p>