

Humor in School

Make Me Laugh: Using Humor in the Classroom

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Tired of spending time after school in detention with students, a teacher decided to give "accordions" to those who acted out in class. An accumulation of three "accordions" would require the offending student to stay after school for a 10-minute session of the teacher practicing "Lady of Spain" on—what else?—her accordion.

"No one ever comes back after the first accordion session," says humor therapist Elaine Lundberg, who offers this anecdote in her workshops with educators.

One teacher was so inspired by the strategy that for classroom infractions he started doling out "Franks"—in which the student had to listen in silence to the teacher croon along with a recording of Old Blue Eyes himself.

These stories illustrate how creative teachers have used humor to deal with one of the more difficult chores they face—maintaining discipline. In fact, humor in the classroom can be an effective social tool that builds bridges with students and relieves stress, say educators and experts alike.

Building Bridges

A 1991 study of how high school teachers use humor showed that they most frequently employ it as a way of putting students at ease, as an attention getter, and as a way to show students that the teacher is human.

"Between student and teacher there's a status differential in the classroom. Humor can help both the student and teacher cross the bridge together," says James Neuliep, a professor of communication at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisc., who conducted the study of high school teachers.

Humor, used appropriately, can help reduce the psychological distance between teachers and students, while inappropriate humor increases distance, says Neuliep.

In other words, humor directed at a student in the form of ridicule, sarcasm, and joking references to ethnic, racial, and gender differences are out, say experts.

And the boundaries of humor are changeable, so that something funny one day is not funny the next, suggests Robert Sylwester, author of *A Biological Brain in a Cultural Classroom: Applying Biological Research to Classroom Management*. Just as teachers need to know where their students are intellectually and developmentally when deciding how far to push their learning, they also need to be sensitive to how they use humor in the classroom, says Sylwester.

By smiling, laughing, or using humor, a teacher can signal to students that either she or the students are "approaching the limits" of what is "culturally appropriate," suggests Sylwester. The desire to push the limits is rooted in the human brain's attempt to know limits, to seek what is biologically possible—as an Olympic athlete does—or define what is culturally appropriate, he says. But, he warns, "you can't push them two miles beyond the edge. There has to be a sense of safety."

"Teachers have to be very, very conscious of their audience," Neuliep adds. "The type of humor seen on television shows like *Friends*, which many high school students watch regularly, could be considered sexual harassment in the classroom."

What's Behind the Laughter?

Appropriate humor and laughter can also foster social ties between people. Sylwester emphasizes that humans "have a social brain" and that schools need to get serious about the collaborative model of learning. In the collaborative setting, classroom management shifts from an authoritarian approach—

which Sylwester considers the most prevalent in schools today—to one that requires more student self-regulation and teacher-student cooperation. Humor can be an important element of that collaborative environment, he says.

Not surprisingly, a teacher who allows a lot of unrestrained laughter in the classroom runs the risk of losing control of the class. After all, laughter is a "primitive, primate vocalization" rooted in human evolution to the panting from exertion during rough-and-tumble physical play, according to Robert Provine, author of *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* and professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Maryland. Intellectual play—humor—is a later development.

Managing Humor

In the classroom, the social benefits of humor and laughter are many, say experts. When students are acting out, humor can help a teacher handle her anxiety, anger, and frustration.

In recent decades the adolescent psyche typically has become "more fragile than in the past," contends Provine, so punishment is an expensive strategy for social control that should be used only in extreme cases. When the teacher punishes routinely, she loses the power of praise in the future, he adds. "Who wants to get praise from someone they don't like?" he says. "Humor allows 'punishment' but without the social cost."

For example, if a student in Provine's classroom abruptly leaves in the middle of the class without a word, he might call out "Men's room is down the hall and to the left." The goal is to lightheartedly let the student know the action was considered rude without resorting to a confrontation.

"I think the most important thing a teacher can do is be open to the humor of the kids," says Cheryl Miller Thurston, who with Elaine Lundberg cowrote *If They're Laughing . . .*, a guide for teachers who don't consider themselves funny.

When Thurston was teaching 9th grade English, a new student came into her class—all six-foot five-inches of him—wearing black leather and chains. "I gulped when he walked in," says Thurston. She built a relationship with this student, however, and deflected potential problems by allowing him to channel his dislike for cats—a direct challenge to her love of them—into various poetry assignments. "He found out he was funny, and the other kids would appreciate his humor, too," says Thurston.

Lundberg suggests that a teacher beginning to use humor should try one thing with which he feels comfortable. It could be as simple as a class "humor board" with various sayings and cartoons, including student submissions. He might also give the "natural class clowns" a way to contribute effectively and constructively, for example, by having them reteach a lesson. This tactic provides an outlet for their desire for the spotlight and gives the teacher an opportunity to assess these students' understanding of the content, she adds.

Relaxing the Learning Environment

Many people believe there is a strong link between laughter and good health. Although experts say that laughter cannot increase immune function, fight disease, or make us more resistant to pain, research does show that laughter increases adrenaline, oxygen flow, and pulse rate. After these heightened responses, the body is more relaxed, and teachers can use this calm feeling to promote sociability and better learning with their students, say researchers.

And at a time when educators have to deal with standards, testing, school violence, and waning public support, the need for humor is greater than ever, say some.

As part of the Kishwaukee Intermediate Delivery System, which provides staff development for educators in northern Illinois, Mary Kay Morrison started a humor improvement plan for school administrators. Morrison, a veteran classroom teacher, worries that education has been under such close political scrutiny lately that even teacher lounges have become workrooms, and educators fear that humor or laughter in the classroom will be viewed by administrators as "not working and therefore not learning."

"I think that our work ethic inhibits the ability for educators to relax enough to even think about using humor as a tool to create a positive environment," says Morrison.

School leaders could benefit by using self-deprecating humor to create a more positive school climate, she asserts. "Self-deprecating humor is a very high form of humor because it requires self-confidence to laugh at yourself and your mistakes," says Morrison.

If administrators and teachers can laugh at themselves, they'll be better able to get students to acknowledge their own shortcomings—and open the doors to more creative problem solving, she suggests.

Humor Across Cultures and Ages

U.S. classrooms can be home to many different cultures, which may have different understandings of humor, especially humor from a teacher. Neuliep says teacher "immediacy behaviors"—any verbal and nonverbal communication, such as humor, eye contact, or gestures, that reduces psychological or physical distance between teachers and students—differ considerably across cultures. For example, in Japan, students generally find teacher humor inappropriate, he adds.

Although Neuliep uses humor in his college classroom, it doesn't always connect with his international students. When he jokingly suggested that the class should have a late Saturday night study session in the library to prepare for a Monday exam, most of the class laughed, but several Japanese students asked for time and room details after class.

"I explained to them that I was joking—it was just American teacher humor," Neuliep recalls.

Ed Dunkelblau, director of the Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning, says that using humor with words—such as puns or reversals—poses challenges in a classroom with second language learners or students from other cultures. But this kind of word play is less likely to offend students, he says. He does advise teachers to watch for signs of confusion and follow up with students to make sure they understand. "It can also be an opportunity to let students talk about what humor is like in their own countries."

Humor in the classroom must also be tailored to the age of the class. With young kids, a high "silly quotient" is good, says Dunkelblau. A teacher can use a clown nose or a fright wig to get attention. For a grammar lesson on "debugging sentences," one elementary school teacher brought in a fly swatter and a can of bug spray and slinked around the room in search of "bugs" for comic relief, he recalls.

By junior high and high school, students may groan but still appreciate a teacher's silly joke. Older students respond to more cognitive humor and unpredictable situations, which teachers can use to reinforce a point or grab student attention. Teachers also should be ready to model and help students recognize what kind of humor is appropriate in class, says Dunkelblau.

Teacher Strategies

The kinds of humor teachers use should differ according to the age as well as the personalities of their students, say experts.

Humor in the classroom is much more than jokes, emphasizes Dunkelblau. It involves the teacher being playful, using exaggeration, telling stories and amusing anecdotes—anything that they've heard, read, or experienced. These actions, according to Dunkelblau, show students that the teacher is human, even vulnerable.

For teachers who want to increase their humor potential, Dunkelblau suggests the following:

- Keep a humor file with items related to your subject area or to education in general.
- Keep track of funny things that students say from year to year and bring these up in an appropriate context.
- Don't be afraid to use props, toys, buttons, and so on, to get students' attention.

Dunkelblau provides a few vivid examples of the last point. He has observed one teacher who captures students' attention by slamming a large plastic hammer on her desk to activate a recording of shattering glass. Another teacher uses a clown horn to keep students on task.

And Dunkelblau recalls one of his own high school English teachers who wore themed earrings (such as little ships for teaching the *Odyssey*) and brightly colored clothing. "She was fun to listen to and fun to look at," and she invited students to contribute to the amusing atmosphere—for example, by having them concoct puns and other word play with new vocabulary.

There are also low-key uses of humor that can be effective ways to manage a classroom, says Marilyn Gootman, author of *The Caring Teacher's Guide to Discipline: Helping Young Students Learn Responsibility, Control, and Respect*. If a child has a certain annoying habit, such as tapping on the desk, the teacher can approach him and suggest they agree on a signal the teacher can use to alert the student to the behavior and get him to stop. For example, for a student who talks a lot, a teacher Gootman knows arranged a "zip your lip" signal, given with a hand motion across the lips and a smile.

"It's like a secret message between the student and the teacher," says Gootman. Using the signal is a positive action because the child is getting individual attention and the teacher discreetly removes a distraction.

"Teachers shouldn't have to put on a dog and pony show," Gootman notes. "Not everyone can be Charlie Chaplin in the classroom."

The most important rule, she says, "is to develop a relationship with your students while being yourself and upholding standards that students can see."

Nonetheless, Dunkelblau likes to remind teachers: "If we're having a good time, we'll remember more."