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ABSTRACT

Focusing on humor as a powerful instructional resource, this booklet addresses a variety of issues regarding humor in the elementary and secondary classroom. Thirteen ways in which humor can help teachers to achieve educational goals are presented, specifically that it (1) attracts attention and provokes thought, (2) liberates creative capacities, (3) helps gain friends, (4) improves communication, (5) soothes difficult moments, (6) can stimulate intercultural study, (7) promotes health, (8) develops a positive attitude and self-image, (9) motivates and energizes, (10) solves problems, (11) increases quality and quantity of students' reading, (12) reinforces desired behaviors, and (13) has entertainment value. An age-based, developmental sequence of a child's sense of humor, derived from various cognitive stage theories, is outlined. Next, the booklet postulates that knowledge of this progression and an awareness of the nature of humor enables teachers to help students analyze their own sense of humor, use humor appropriately in social situations, and speak and write creatively. The physical aspects of humor and the superiority and incongruity theories of humor are discussed and 11 reasons for including humor in one's daily routine to relieve stress are presented. Finally, a list of 49 currently used, practical teaching ideas for employing humor in the classroom are offered. A bibliography is included. (JD)

FASTBACK

241





# Learning Through Laughter: Humor in the Classroom

Claudia E. Cornett





PHI DELTA KAPPA
EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

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by
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# Introduction

*Laugh and the world laughs with you;*
*Weep and you weep alone,*
*For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,*
*But has trouble enough of its own.*
—Ella Wheeler Wilcox

What do James Watt, Chuckles candy, Tickle deodorant, Andy Rooney, M*A*S*H, the Mona Lisa, the Bible, and Norman Cousins have in common? Well, Watt lost his job because of it, Chuckles and Tickle got their names from it, Rooney writes it, M*A*S*H has a variety of it, Mona's smile reflects hers, the Old Testament has 29 references to it, and Cousins claims it helped cure him of ankylosing spondylitis. The answer: *Humor!*

Humor is a significant part of our lives, yet it often goes unacknowledged. Skim the TV schedule to discover an abundance of sitcoms, cartoons, and other comedy programs. Turn to the editorial page of any newspaper to find a satirical cartoon. And don't forget the comics that make us laugh at ourselves and society as seen through the eyes of Lucy and Charlie Brown, Garfield, and Funky Winkerbean. Erma Bombeck has another book on the best-seller list this year. Her stuff is tame compared to the *Truly Tasteless Jokes* trilogy that sold more than a million copies in 1983. Last Christmas I received

a joke-a-day calendar. Just the other day on my car radio, I heard the results of a poll about what men and women look for in a mate. Right up at the top, along with intelligence and looks, was a good sense of humor. The car right in front of me had a license plate that read, "PUN"!

We really do love to laugh, chortle, giggle, guffaw, grin, snicker, bellow, chuckle, cackle, crow, snort, titter, and ho-ho-ho. Our language is full of words and phrases that express the magnitude of laughter in our lives: "laugh till I cried," "side-splitting guffaw," "poking fun," "howl with laughter," "tickle your funny bone," "laugh it off." And from the darker side of humor we find: "stung by wit," "bitten by satire," "butt of a joke," "laughing stock," "being laughed at," and "no laughing matter."

Humor has something to offer each of us as we work with children of all ages and abilities. Humor can be used to help correct reading problems, control behavioral disorders, build vocabulary, teach foreign languages, and integrate social isolates. Humor can be one of our most powerful instructional resources. As I shall attempt to show in this fastback, we really can learn through laughter.

## Why Get Serious About Humor?

*The jeste. is brother to the sage.*

—Arthur Koestler

*Then I commended mirth because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry.*

—Ecclesiastes 8:15

One of the pieces of advice frequently given to preservice teachers goes something like this: "Never smile until Christmas!" While obviously meant as hyperbole, there are beginning teachers who take this adage literally, thinking that humor and laughter in the classroom contribute to discipline problems. How sad! Humor can function in ways that help us achieve the educational goals we hold most dear. Here are 13 reasons why teachers should get serious about incorporating humor into their lessons.

1. *Attracts Attention and Provokes Thought.* Consider this riddle: What goes ha-ha, plop? If you haven't heard it before, then it's likely you're at least mildly curious about the answer. Once you're set up for a joke or riddle, you eagerly await the punch line — like you're doing right now. So I have your attention and keep it until I give you the answer and you groan, smile slightly, or laugh right out loud. By now you're getting aggravated because you've been kept waiting too long. Here's the answer: A man laughing his head off!

Now whatever rating on your laugh meter you give that one, it serves to make my point: humor attracts attention and provokes thought – two objectives that must certainly be on every teacher's daily lesson plan. Humor as an attention-getting mechanism has long been used by public speakers who introduce their remarks with a joke or humorous anecdote. Could you see yourself starting a history lesson in a similar manner, or is there nothing funny in all of history? Remember Roosevelt cracking jokes at Churchill's expense and thereby breaking the ice with Stalin at the Teheran meeting in 1943? How about the Nast political cartoons that helped to break up the Boss Tweed ring in New York City in the 1870s?

Look at it another way. Some of our most troublesome discipline problems are students who seek attention through any means available. Are there creative ways to get these students involved by letting them tell jokes or humorous anecdotes, which will give them the attention from peers for positive reasons? Of course there is the problem of where they will get these nuggets. Answer: You provide the time, they find the material. Yes, it's there if you look for it in the library. The assumption here is that everyone enjoys hearing something funny; and as author Arthur Koestler put it, "ha-ha can lead to ah-ha!"

Back to the decapitated man riddle. Think about what happened as you read the question part of the riddle. Did you begin thinking of possible answers (prediction)? Did you come up with several answers from which you chose the best (decision making)? Did you try to remember the answer from a previous telling (recall)? Now consider what happened when you read the punch line. Suddenly it all made sense, and yet it was all nonsense! Perhaps you had a mental image of the gruesome decapitation and felt repulsed. Whatever you did, you were thinking; and note the possible levels of thought: problem solving, prediction, decision making, visual imaging. Of all the things teachers teach, these higher-level critical and creative thinking skills have to be some of our greatest challenges. Humorous materials provide ideal content to teach such thinking skills because children are motivated to read and listen to stories that make them laugh, even though they may not realize they are using higher-level

thinking processes to comprehend funny stories, poems, jokes, and riddles.

2. *Liberates Creative Capacities.* Besides attracting attention and stimulating critical-creative thinking, humor offers novelty, a quality that all individuals seek. Creative people have the ability to see things from an original vantage point, often a humorous one. Highly creative people have been found to initiate humor more often, to place greater value on having a sense of humor, to appreciate and understand others' humor more, and to be more playful verbally when interacting with others. From their early fantasy play, creative children grow into adults who thrive on discovering incongruous relationships. Such adults possess the kinds of playful frames of mind necessary for solving serious problems in creative ways.

In order to "get" a joke or riddle, like the one you were just given, you must think about phrases like "laughing his head off" in an uncommon way. The distorted visual images created by this type of punning are very similar to the idea of play used in any creative process. Humor in the curriculum stimulates the kinds of thinking processes used frequently by highly creative people. (Many of the responses scored as highly original on creativity tests are the humorous responses.) My hypothesis is that engaging in humor can free up or increase the amount and quality of a person's creative capacities.

3. *Helps Gain Friends.* Humor serves the social functions of promoting group membership and helping us deal with awkward moments. When you have laughed with someone after sharing a joke or experiencing a humorous incident, you tend to feel a bond with that person. You tend to seek out that person to recount the incident: "Remember the time when . . ." We develop these sorts of relationships with individuals and groups because laughter is pleasurable. In fact, people do laugh louder and longer when in larger groups. One reason for this is the contagious nature of laughter. The point is we are attracted to people who have a sense of humor similar to our own; the emotionally positive experience of laughing together creates a group feeling, giving the members a sense of security and self-confidence.

Unfortunately, when there are in-groups there are also out-groups. The experience of being around a group who is having a good time

when you are not in the group is uncomfortable. Yet, secure, self-confident individuals can tolerate being on the outside of such a group because they have others with whom they share jokes and stories. But what about children who have never learned how to share in a joke? Because mentally retarded children often have difficulty telling jokes and understanding the word play involved in most forms of humor, they may feel left out of the group. The same would be true for children with behavioral disorders. Fortunately joke telling and understanding can be and are being taught to help such children give pleasure to others and gain friends in the process (Dale 1979).

4. *Improves Communication.* Think for a minute about the language skills involved in joke telling. To deliver a joke effectively requires speaking skills related to volume, rate, tone, and pause – especially pause. We all appreciate George Burns' mastery of the pause, but it is another matter to try to replicate it. In addition to speaking skills, joke telling requires a good listener. Then there is reading involved in finding a joke to work on. If vocabulary development is part of your language arts package, consider this joke: "Did you hear about the butcher who backed into his meat grinder and got a little behind in his work?" Puns, figurative language, homonyms, and homophones – all these are staples of jokes and riddles. When children tell jokes, it may be the first time peers have laughed *with* them rather than *at* them. In no time joke telling can turn into a communication skills curriculum with the advantage of having fun in the learning process.

5. *Helps Deal with Difficult Moments.* What do you do when reading to a crowd of a hundred and out comes the phrase "firecrappers in the medicine cabinet" instead of "firecrackers?" Or you get copying fluid all over yourself the one day you wear a white suit? Or the transparency starts to smoke while you are conducting an inservice session with 200 English teachers? If you have had incidents similar to mine, I hope you did what I did under such circumstances: laughed at myself. Coping with embarrassing moments by poking fun at ourselves enables others to laugh with us, and we save face at the same time. In a few seconds the disastrous incident can be rendered impotent, and in the process all can enjoy laughing together.

If you are able to respond to an awkward situation with a flash of wit, the occasion becomes memorable. (My attempt at wit was to tell the 200 English teachers that my transparencies were so secret they would self-destruct after five seconds.) While everyone is not blessed with a quick wit, it can be learned, just as we can learn to laugh at ourselves. And in the case of humor we have many potential teachers. Children develop their own sense of humor from the people around them. If children have parents and teachers who laugh at their own foibles, then they have models to imitate. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all children could apprentice under masters who know how to find the lighter side of the dark times in life. As author and lecturer Joel Goodman puts it, "Levity defies gravity."

6. *Can Be an Entree into the Study of Other Cultures.* The study of various form of humor in different cultures is fascinating. Elliott (1960) examined "shame" cultures in which being laughed at was reason for suicide. In some cultures fools and satirists were thought to possess magical powers. One extreme example is the Greenland Eskimos, whose disputes are resolved by a laughter duel. Contestants ridicule one another with humorous insults and obscene jokes while beating a drum. Audience laughter determines the winner, and the loser is humiliated and may even go into exile. Hindu humor is considered savage by many Westerners who see the pranks of the monkey-god, Honuman, as cruel. On the other hand, Japanese humor comes off with a gentleness, as in the story of the Dragon King whose wife thinks she must have a monkey's liver or she will die. With verbal trickery the monkey saves himself and his liver. At the story's climax when the wife is told there is no liver, she simply says, "Then I'll just have to get better without it!" American Indians, known for their reserve, endow a ritual clown or trickster with respect and even tolerate his violation of their strongest social taboos, including incest (Levine 1961). On a more contemporary level, American viewers who have watched such British TV productions as *Benny Hill* or *All Creatures Great and Small* often are bewildered by the "inside" jokes or phrases peculiar to the British. Particularly with *Benny Hill*, there are sexual innuendoes that are unfamiliar to Americans, so they don't catch the humor.

The examples cited above show how humor reflects the values of particular cultures. Moving from these exotic examples, think about people in your own social circles. Do they tell jokes that degrade women or minorities? What about the current fascination with ethnic jokes, sacrilegious riddles, and ribald jokes packaged in best-selling books like *Totally Gross Jokes*, *Gross Gifts*, and *Outrageously Offensive Jokes*? Do they reflect a "breakdown of decency" as historian Barbara Tuchman claims, or have these forms of humor always been around? Or is it just seeing them on the best-seller list that is shocking? When dealing with culture-specific humor, parents and teachers should realize they are teaching powerful value lessons to children who hear their jokes.

Nothing seems to be above a good laugh, especially when it comes to politics. A bum traveling out West learned he could scrounge free drinks in bars by shouting insults about Presidential candidates in the upcoming election. He was getting pretty good at guessing which one to degrade. He came to a little Colorado town, went into the first bar, and shouted, "Jimmy Carter is a horse's ass!" But instead of a drink he got booted out the back door. At the next bar he took a different tack. "Ronald Reagan is a horse's ass!" he shouted, but again found himself face down in the street. He looked up at a cowboy standing nearby and asked in a bewildered tone, "If this ain't Carter Country and it ain't Reagan Country, what is it?" "Son," replied the cowboy, "this is *horse* country!" International politics also generates its share of jokes. A riddle currently making the rounds is "What dish is radioactive and has feathers?" Answer: "Chicken Kiev."

Teachers might want to develop a multicultural education unit on humor in different countries. A good resource is Barbara Walker's *Laughing Together* (1977), a collection of children's jokes from dozens of countries. Studying the distinguishing characteristics of humor in different cultures will lead to an understanding of similarities, too; for smiling and laughing transcend all cultures. In general, it is the humor stimulus that varies from people to people, although there seem to be some archetypal forms of humor that are dependent on neither time nor culture. As an example, when shown a film of the pantomiming artistry of Charlie Chaplin, African tribesmen dissolved into hilarious laughter.

7. *For the Health of It!* While one might be skeptical of Norman Cousin's "humor-as-a-cure" claim, it cannot be denied that a good laugh makes you feel better. There are physiological reasons for this: increased oxygen in the blood; exercising of lungs, diaphragm, face muscles, and sometimes even arms and legs (as in knee-slapping); a pulse drop; and increased production of the body's natural painkillers (endorphins). Tension created in initial phases of joke or story telling (anticipation) subsides after laughter and actually falls below the pre-joke level. The length of time the decreased tension continues depends on the intensity of the laughter, but it may be as much as 45 minutes (Peter and Dana 1982).

Laughter's relaxation possibilities have direct relevance for many stressful school situations, such as test taking. Using a couple of humorous items on the test, casual joking with students right before the test, and structured student-led joke sharing before the test or at breaks during long tests are tension-reducing techniques teachers can use.

Next to test taking, one of the tensest situations in a classroom is when there are discipline problems or some kind of disruption. Some class disruptions can be overlooked. Often gentle teasing can accomplish more than a vicious scolding. A smile can be a powerful reinforcer. Children enjoy being around teachers who, by their smiles, appear relaxed themselves and relax those around them.

8. *Develops a Positive Attitude and Self-Image.* My mother could never spank my brother, Todd. One look into his twinkling blue eyes and at his dimpled mischievous grin and she just had to laugh. Todd learned early that humor disarms. You cannot be angry and laugh at the same time. Resistance melts in the face of humor, and so it can become an important resource in resolving conflict and diffusing tension.

Teachers who use their sense of humor to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere know how to reverse the direction of negative energy. When a substitute teacher had a class pull the old trick of all dropping their books on the floor at the same time (negative energy), she went right over to her desk and pushed a book on the floor, too. "Sorry I'm late," she said. The teacher who gets a class to laugh with her will enjoy teaching more and feel better about herself. Why? Be-

cause when I make you laugh I feel better because I've made you feel better. Of course, it works the same way for children. Students who have poor self-concepts begin to view themselves differently if they use humor appropriately to bring pleasure to others. A class that has opportunities for sharing humor will have a more positive atmosphere, and the students and teacher in it will even look better. Yes, smiling improves your appearance.

9. *Motivates and Energizes.* We all have felt the tensions of being under stress, and we all have experienced the exhilarating feeling that follows laughter. Studies of how the brain reacts during laughter have shown that there is a chemical explanation for the responses. Laughter triggers the production of a substance called catecholamine, which actually boosts alertness. Also, the cholesterol that is produced when we are under stress stops being made when we bask in the relaxed state following a hearty laugh.

Are there classroom implications in this bit of brain chemistry? Certainly! With lethargic, inattentive students, starting a lesson with a humorous story, joke, or riddle can gain their attention and actually put them in a more active mental state. Interest can then be maintained in the lesson by injecting humor throughout the lesson. For a description of how humor breaks during lectures increases retention, see *Training Today*, 21 May 1981. Of course the best use of humor is when it is content-related and spontaneous.

10. *Solves Problems.* There are at least two ways humor aids in problem solving. First, it helps all of us to cope with seemingly insoluble problems by enabling us to separate ourselves from the problem at least temporarily. Second, for students with behavioral disorders, humor is a means of helping them cope with hostile and aggressive feelings. Joking with students about problems is a means of releasing tension that might otherwise be acted out by hitting, punching, or kicking. Even among adults the potential of humor as a tension reducer is demonstrated by how they joke about such sensitive topics as sex, religion, and politics.

11. *Increases Quality and Quantity of Students' Reading.* Students will read more if they are enjoying what they are reading. This certainly is not a new idea, but using humorous materials as the major

content of reading programs for poor readers is a new idea. John and Priscilla Bennet provide a description of one such program in the *Reading Teacher* (May 1982).

12. *Reinforces Desired Behaviors.* We should not forget the reinforcing effects of a smile or a wink. Good teachers do this frequently. We could all use this technique more. There also are good possibilities for using humorous books, films, and tapes in contingency management systems.

13. *It's Cheap Entertainment!*

With these 13 reasons for using humor in the classroom, I rest my case. Now let us look at a brief history of humor in order to understand the context for contemporary humor.

# A Short History of Humor

*Men have been wise in very different modes;*
*but they've always laughed in the same way*
—Samuel Johnson

No one will ever know when the first human smiled, but it must have been long ago. Even our distant relatives, the chimpanzee, monkey, and gorilla, exhibit baring of the teeth behaviors, which look remarkably like smiles. Also, chimps and monkeys love to do funny posturing and clowning to amuse human audiences.

What is recorded in history is the origin of the word, "humor." It is a Latin word meaning "liquid," "fluid," or "moisture." In ancient Greece a person's temperament was thought to be controlled by four humors (fluids). When in proper balance, a person was in a good humor, so to speak. But too much of one of the fluids produced moods: irritable if yellow bile was disproportionate, gloomy or melancholy if black bile predominated, sluggish if phlegm was too abundant, and sanguine if an individual had an oversupply of blood. A person possessing an excess of one of the fluids came to be called a "humorist" or a person subject to "humours." The prescription for controlling bad temperament caused by excessive "humours" was laughter. Unfortunately, when the poor soul could not just laugh it off, he became the object of others' laughter. Gradually by the 18th century, "humorist"

came to mean "someone who was skilled in the artistic or literary use of humor," and humor had come to include everything from wit to buffoonery.

Over the centuries views of humor and what makes people laugh changed. We now think it appalling that Renaissance princes amused themselves by collecting dwarfs, hunchbacks, and other deformed humans. Yet it is refreshing to read that laughing was thought to "moveth much aire in the breast, and sendeth the warmer spirits outward" (Richard Mulcaster, 16th century physician). Our pilgrim fathers considered laughter a low form of behavior. These 17th century Christians looked askance at any form of comedy, finding it contradictory to "Christian silence, gravity and sobriety; for laughing, sporting, gaming, mocking, jesting, vain talking, etc. is not Christian liberty, nor harmless mirth" (Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, 1676). Imagine being a female in Victorian England where "girls and women were permitted to smile in deference or to giggle at the slightest suggestion of impropriety, [but] they were not to laugh with glee. They could be embarrassed but not happy" (Goldstein and McGhee 1972).

Today definitions of humor focus mainly on cognitive aspects of what makes us laugh (language play and unlikely visual and auditory images). Yet remaining with us is the idea of humor as something that is ludicrous, incongruous, abnormal, and out-of-the-ordinary. Laughter as a curative is now becoming a topic for research and a popular subject of books.

# Development of a Sense of Humor

*Wrinkles merely indicate where smiles have been.*
—Mark Twain

*You grow up the day you have your first real laugh — at yourself.*
—Ethel Barrymore

Each person's sense of humor is unique, but it changes as one matures. In one study involving students aged 7 to 13 and teachers, they were asked to do a variety of activities that would reflect their sense of humor, such as draw a funny picture. While nearly every child found the drawing activity hilarious and went to work with great enthusiasm, 80% of the teachers ignored the drawing assignment (Brumbaugh and Wilson 1940).

Formation of a sense of humor seems to follow a developmental pattern that parallels the child's intellectual and emotional development. Influencing this developmental progression are personality variables; cultural and educational background; fantasy and play opportunities; intelligence, which is positively correlated with preference for certain types of humor; and sex, which accounts for the single largest source of individual differences in sense of humor (Kappas 1967; McGhee 1979).

The significance of sex differences in sense of humor warrants a short discussion. As early as age six, differences between male and

female humor become obvious: boys initiate more humor, tell more jokes, do more silly rhyming, use more "naughty words," and clown around and make faces more frequently. McGhee speculates that the factors leading to humor sex typing may be operating even by age three (McGhee 1979). By the first grade there is a tendency for boys to laugh more, while girls smile more. Eventually girls come to laugh more, but mostly when others are laughing. In addition to sex differences, left-right brain differences in humor have been found. The right hemisphere is thought to be the locus of "Harpo" or slapstick-type humor, while the left hemisphere is the locus of "Groucho" humor such as puns and satire (Gardner 1981).

Development of a sense of humor moves from a visual to a verbal focus. In general, the progression is toward more objectivity, manifested by being able to laugh at oneself and at life's predicaments. Familiarity with these developmental stages enables teachers to select books that children find humorous as well as to understand why children see humor in situations that are not funny to their teachers. The following developmental sequence of humor is derived from the cognitive stage theories of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Jane Loevinger and the work of Paul McGhee.

**Developmental Sequence of Humor**

| Age | Humor Behavior |
|---|---|
| 1 week | Smiles during sleep and in response to tactile stimulation. |
| 2 months | Grins in response to configuration of human face. |
| 4 months | Laughs when presented such stimuli as tickling, body contact, large toys, rhythmic or unexpected movements, teasing, and peekaboo games. |
| 2 to 4 years | Responds to perceptual incongruities such as distortions of objects and words; rhyming nonsense words are funny ("daddy addy" or "maddy saddy"). |

| | |
|---|---|
| 4 to 6 years | Body functions, body noises, taboo words, clowning, silly rhyming, slapstick, chanting, and misnaming are funny. Enjoys simple riddles and word play with own name (Sticky Micky or Silly Sally). Responds to the social smile but has little capacity for sympathetic humor. Exaggerations of size and shape are funny, as is any form of surprise. |
| 7 to 8 years | Becomes aware of linguistic ambiguity and realizes that words and phrases cannot always be taken literally. This is the height of the practical joke period; others' discomfort is perceived as funny. Riddles and jokes are repeated incessantly. Enjoys stories in which animals behave like humans. |
| 9 to 12 years | At the beginning of this stage, concrete puns, conventional jokes, word plays, and moron and knock-knock jokes are popular. Gradually sympathetic humor emerges; but there is still perseveration of things that strike them as funnny: retelling jokes and doing stunts. Delights in anything that deviates from the norm, taboo subjects or things adults disapprove of. Begins to accept some jokes about self, can be teased. Marked increase in verbal humor over the previous stage. Toward the end of this stage, begins to learn to use humor for personal ends; including channeling negative feelings into positive humorous situations. |
| 13 years + | Begins to reflect on "why" someone laughs and deprecates laughter that is unfeeling. Original good-natured humor, including sarcasm and self-ridicule, are appreciated. Tongue-in-cheek humor, social satire; and irony become preferred humor modes. Kidding; joking insults, loud laughter in public places may be observed. Forbidden topics are not laughed at in mixed company. Verbal wit is increasingly dominant over visual. Noticeable tendency to use humor to save face. Ability to parody may appear. |

Once individuals reach a certain level of cognitive and emotional maturity, an interesting shift in perception occurs: when we become capable of empathy, jokes at the expense of other people are funny only when we perceive them as not being harmful to these people. This cognitive shift toward sympathetic humor occurs as early as third or fourth grade when, for example, taunting that formerly produced hilarious laughter is now seen as hurtful, because children begin to think about how they would feel if they were on the receiving end. Of course, not all individuals grow out of the egocentric stage. We all know adults that laugh boisterously at incidents we perceive as embarrassing for someone else.

# The Nature of Humor

*A joke is the shortest distance between two points.*

*Humor . . . is essentially a complete mystery.*

—E.B. White

To appreciate different kinds of humor requires varying levels of cognitive development. For example, slapstick and clowning are visual, non-verbal types of humor, while satire requires inferential thinking. A teacher who knows something about the nature of humor will have greater insight into discipline problems involving students who are consistently the butts of jokes, those who make frequent sarcastic remarks, those who poke fun excessively, and those who persist in drawing attention to themselves by constantly clowning. Also, understanding the nature of humor helps to explain why some children have difficulty taking certain things seriously, why some laugh at the wrong times, and why some have trouble understanding certain types of humor such as puns or political cartoons.

By knowing what humor is, teachers can help students analyze their own sense of humor and its effect on others. They can help children learn how to use humor appropriately in social situations and to use it creatively in writing and speaking.

## Physical Aspects of Humor

Who has not responded to laughing eyes and a broad pearly smile? Who can resist joining others caught up in convulsive laughter? What makes it happen? Why does one person roll in the aisles watching Mel Brooks while another person is offended? Why are certain words and phrases funny? How can we laugh at the misfortunes of others, usually those less fortunate than ourselves (morons, fools, bums)? The mystery of how humor works has yet to be completely unraveled, but there are theories about why we laugh when stimulated with everything from tickling to satire.

In simplified form, humor involves a three-step process: arousal, problem solving, and resolution. In the arousal stage we are set up by familiar cues to indicate that the situation is a humorous one. Cues can be anything from a symbol, such as a clown costume, to twinkling eyes that signal the tease. Social circumstances will influence the arousal process, depending on whether you are with friends or strangers, the same or opposite sex, or in a small or large group. Also, the content, structure, and complexity of the joke will have a bearing on the arousal process. For example, most adults have outgrown the knock-knock jokes that children take delight in. To amuse adults, the knock-knock joke must overcome the simplified structure with a clever play on words.

Once the arousal or set-up is seen or heard, the problem-solving step begins in order to make sense of incongruous information. Anticipating the punch line, using visual imagery, and trying to remember an answer you heard before are some thinking processes that go into action at this point. These mental efforts produce physical and emotional changes (for example, increased pulse rate, mood change). Finally, you get it. The punch line is delivered and the incongruities are resolved. With resolution comes myriad types of laughing or smiling, which are outlets for the emotions stimulated in the arousal step but left hanging during the problem-solving step.

The laughter reflex results when suddenly it all makes sense. Mental energy built up to unlock the joke puzzle is still there at the end of the joke but is worked off by the laughter. Immanuel Kant described

this phenomenon as "the sudden transformation of a tense expectation into nothing."

Tickling is something else. We don't always laugh when tickled. Arthur Koestler points out that babies laugh 15 times more often when tickled by their mothers than by strangers. It seems that at least two conditions must be met before tickling turns to laughter: 1) tickling must be perceived as a "mock attack," with alternating feelings of security and apprehension; and 2) it must be done by another person. Surprise also is an important component of tickling. The "I'm gonna get ya" or "Here I come" heighten the aggressive mood of a tickling episode. As Koestler says, "The best tickler impersonates an aggressor, but is simultaneously known not to be one!" (Koestler 1979).

Theories about the nature of humor from Plato to Freud have tried to account for the paradox of laughter. How a "complicated mental activity like reading a page of Thurber should cause a specific motor response on the reflex levels is a lopsided phenomenon which has puzzled philosophers since antiquity" (Koestler 1964, p. 30). Koestler concludes that "Humor is the only domain of creative activity where a stimulus on a high level of complexity produces a massive and sharply defined response on the level of physiological reflexes."

## The Superiority Theory of Humor

Morons, fools, clowns, buffoons, gluttons, drunkards, and misers have all served as objects of ridicule in jokes and humorous stories. The superiority theory of humor asserts that humans derive pleasure from seeing themselves as better off than others. Of the 29 references to humor in the Old Testament, 13 are about scorn, derision, or making fun of someone; only two describe nonaggressive laughter. We seem to need to pick on those less fortunate than ourselves by poking fun at them. French philosopher Henri Bergson called this our "unavowed intention to humiliate and consequently to correct our neighbour." We laugh at morons who make mistakes that we would know better than to make. We may, in retrospect, learn to laugh at our own past foibles because we now feel superior over what we did or were then.

Bergson saw as the source of humor "something mechanical encrusted upon the living." That favorite character of children's literature, the maid Amelia Bedelia, is humorous because she is the caricature of literal mindedness. She behaves like a machine, doing exactly as she is told. When her employer tells her to draw the drapes, she gets out paper and pencil; dressing the chicken calls for a pair of suspendered short pants. Children can laugh at Amelia's antics when they understand that words can have more than one meaning. They feel smarter than Amelia. Caricatures of any kind – puppets; jack-in-the-boxes, and impersonators – are humorous to us because they represent lower forms of beings to which we feel superior. The clown who pours water into a bucket full of holes and Don Quixote who tilts at windmills are other examples of characters we laugh at because they are "dumber" than we are.

Aristotle, Cicero, Descartes, and Francis Bacon all took the view that laughter arises when a defect or deformity is seen in others. Children often think mispronounced words and mistakes of classmates are grand opportunities for ridicule. It seems that humans are capable of what Bergson calls "anesthesia of the heart." Psychologist William McDougall thought laughter was "an antidote to sympathy, a protective reaction shielding us from the depressive influence of the shortcomings of our fellow man."

Seeing defects in others is humorous to us only when the defect is perceived as not being painful to the victim. If we thought Stan Laurel really was hurt when he took one of his many pratfalls, we probably would not think it was funny. The situation must be seen as a fantasy, a pretense, like the mirror at the fair that reflects back gross distortions of our bodies.

The superiority theory seems to explain the humor we find in defects of persons who usually are accorded great dignity or respect. The English teacher who misspells a word, the violin virtuoso whose string snaps during a concert, the corporate president whose fly is unzipped are all funnier because they are larger than life to some. For a moment the superior are inferior to us. As Mark Twain put it, "Everything is funny as long as it's happening to someone else."

The superiority theory doesn't explain all humor. For example, did you hear the one about the absolutely perfect man who had no friends because no one was perfect enough for him? Feeling lonely he decided the only solution was to have himself cloned. Indeed, when the clone arrived he was perfect in every way, except for one thing: he only spoke in obscenities. The perfect man was appalled at this defect; and when he could stand it no longer, he decided to do him in. He took his clone to the edge of a cliff and told him to look at the panoramic view. When the clone leaned out to see the scene, the perfect man pushed him off the cliff. And that was the first obscene clone fall!

Analysis of the above joke reveals a familiar joke structure: "did you hear the one," and "all except one thing." The listener is cued into a particular frame of mind, and logic is willingly suspended. We pretend to believe the logic that there could be an absolutely perfect man and that technology can order up a clone. The suspension of logic is part of the humor illusion that, like dreams, is packed with expectations of exaggeration and nonsense. It's a game, a puzzle, a mystery to be solved; we play because we know from past experience the reward of laughter waits at the end.

This joke has humorous elements that can be explained by the superiority theory. The perfect man is one in whom we would like to find flaws that are possessed by the rest of us; the clone is a technological invention that looks human, but has the intriguing defect of speaking only in obscenities. There is fascination with obscenity because it is taboo in polite society. While all these elements are a part of the joke, they are only background. The punch line is a simple pun, and it is unexpected. The pun works if the listener is familiar with the phrase "obscene phone call." It is acoustical humor -- rather low level to be sure -- but funny because of the unexpected punch line. Koestler describes the punch line as "the intellect turning a somersault." There is pleasure in the unexpected; we enjoy being surprised in this way. It is much like someone jumping at you from around a corner, initial fright dissolves into laughter when you discover a familiar friend simply playing a trick.

## The Incongruity Theory of Humor

Humor resulting from unexpected connections is explained by the incongruity theory. Lewis Carroll's nonsensical "Jabberwocky" is a mixture of invented words and real ones, but all are ordered according to standard English syntax. The mix is incongruous. Puppies whose heads and feet are too big for their bodies are incongruous. Big, bulky tubas seem incongruous with the rest of the instruments in the symphony orchestra. Our humorous feelings about the examples above are similiar to our feelings about the fat lady in the circus. They shouldn't be but they are!

The flip-flopping process of incongruity-based humor involves two conflicting sets of rules, two frames of reference, or a reversal of figure and ground. Female impersonators are simultaneously man and woman. Alice Roosevelt Longworth's Law of Dinner Companions: "If you can't say anything good about someone, sit right here by me," has the elements of "refined lady" of position, the opening words of a familiar adage, and then POW! the unexpected. We chuckle when the stereotype of "refined lady" is punctured.

One more example should suffice. If you haven't read Fred Gwynne's *The King Who Rained* and *A Chocolate Moose*, you have missed a real treat. Gwynne, the former star of the TV series *Munsters*, has created picture books that delight all ages. He uses a simple device, figurative expressions in our language, and draws illustrations depicting the figurative expressions literally. Some favorites of both children and adults: "Mommy says she sometimes gets a frog in her throat," and "Daddy says our family has a coat of arms." Each of these statements is illustrated literally with a bizarre picture, which is nonsensical but funny. We laugh because we know better (superiority theory) but primarily because of the literal representation of idiom (incongruity theory).

# A Laugh a Day

*Mirth is God's medicine.*

—Henry Ward Beecher

*The effect of laughter upon the mind not only brings relaxation with it, so far as mental tension is concerned, but makes it also less prone to dreads and less solicitous about the future. This favorable effect on the mind influences various functions of the body and makes them healthier than would otherwise be the case.*

—James Walsh, American physician

After a good laugh we all feel more relaxed; we are relieved of tension born of immediate or long-term stress. We sigh, breathe more deeply, and feel renewed. Our mood is positive and spirits are high. No stress-management workshop could offer more!

Koestler calls laughter the "luxury reflex." It seems to have a mind of its own and is as unique as our fingerprints. Listen to the laughs of people around you for one day; you are bound to hear everything from cacklers to snorters. Unlike other reflexes, laughter seems to serve no biological purpose. Koestler concludes that "the involuntary contraction of 15 facial muscles, associated with certain irrepressible noises, strikes one as an activity without any utilitarian value, quite unrelated to survival." However, it is clear that laughter works off tension, as in "nervous laughter"; and it has long been considered an

aid to digestion (remember the court jesters at banquets in Medieval times). Laurence Peter and Bill Dana, in their book, *The Laughter Prescription* (1982), list four ways humor and laughter control pain: 1) by distracting attention, 2) by reducing tension, 3) by changing expectations, and 4) by increasing production of endorphins – the body's natural painkillers. They claim that laughter's ability to cause the muscles suddenly to go limp can be of great value in the treatment of stress. Following are some things to do to improve your health through humor.

1. Adopt a playful frame of mind and don't take yourself too seriously ("I got a master's degree in English so I could supervise a study hall!") Smile more, it improves your appearance.

2. Look for the lighter, brighter side. Joel Goodman calls this using "mental aikido." (Aikido is a defense skill in which power can be removed from a negative force by simply flowing with the direction of the force.) An example Goodman uses is a man whose car was crushed by a tree in a tornado. The man made a sign for his automobile that said, "compact car."

3. Laugh at yourself. As Ethel Barrymore said, "You grow up the day you have your first real laugh – at yourself." We all are fools some of the time, and admitting it is a sign of real maturity. By laughing at ourselves we enable others to laugh *with* us.

4. Make a humor first-aid kit containing anecdotes, stories, cartoons, and jokes that make you laugh again and again. Put all these pepper-uppers together and pull them out when you need a lift. But don't be selfish with your first-aid humor kit. Grin and share it on bulletin boards, in newsletters, or in the teachers' lounge.

5. Laugh with others, not at them. Students are especially vulnerable to sarcasm and public ridicule. If there is any doubt about whether a joke or jibe will be misunderstood or will offend someone, do not use it.

6. Make others laugh, not by becoming a clown but by letting your own natural sense of humor emerge. This includes being a good listener. Others will enjoy sharing their jokes with you because you respond enthusiastically. As Koestler says, "Laughter needs an echo," so join in when the opportunity presents itself.

7. Become a humor consumer. Listen and look for humor all around you, in church bulletins, on road signs, in the newspaper, and especially in classrooms. It's everywhere, so stop and enjoy it.

8. Build a humor support group. Gather around you people who share your sense of humor, especially in the workplace. Everyone needs someone to laugh with no matter how corny the joke or stupid the story.

9. Think funny. Teachers should be models for students. This includes showing how your sense of humor gets you through embarrassing moments and enables you to accept problems that have no solutions. Students learn more from the teachers they laugh with.

10. Permit it, reinforce it, use it in your teaching, teach students how to use it. Instead of "Let's get serious" and "Wipe that smile off your face," sometimes we need to encourage students to "get silly" and laugh.

11. Meet the minimum daily requirement. The average American laughs 15 times a day. You *need* at least 5 full minutes of hearty laughing each day. Get it wherever and whenever you can, but find a regular supplier because it's very addictive.

# Humor in the Classroom

*Among those whom I like,*
*I can find no common denominator;*
*but among those whom I love, I can:*
*all of them make me laugh.*
—W.H. Auden

If teachers are exempt from what Max Eastman called the "handicap of being grown up," then they will be able to see the funny side of life and use humor to solve discipline problems and to enrich the curriculum. Following is a list of 49 activities teachers currently are using to get humor on their side in the classroom. Try one or try them all.

## Practical Teaching Ideas

1. Read aloud something humorous each day. See the bibliography for lists of humorous books. Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky, and William Coles have delightful poetry books. Robert Newton Peck's *Soup* books are great read-alouds for intermediate students. Nothing can beat Beverly Cleary for grades 2 to 4.
2. Start a humorous quotations collection to which students can add. They could be on a bulletin board or in a file box. *Bartlett's Quo-*

*tations* and other collections can be found in most libraries; many are organized by subject areas.

3. Organize a joke festival or marathon as a culmination of a language arts unit. Build up to it with a joke-of-the-week on the board or have a joke drop-box that students can read from when other work is complete.
4. Hold a best-joke contest. Have students rate submitted jokes or read them aloud to determine funniness rating.
5. Collect spoonerisms (for example, It's kisstumary to cuss the bride) and other humorous language forms: puns, pleonasms, conundrums, mixed idioms, palindromes, epitaphs, tall tales, tangletalk, chants, limericks, riddles, etc.
6. Do an art project with pictures of animal or body parts combined to create incongruous images. Have students name their creations.
7. Collect and then alphabetize into a class book all the words students can think of that describe ways to laugh and smile.
8. Do group creative writing using the word "laugh" as many times as possible. Student teams can compete, but their stories must make sense.
9. Share personal humorous anecdotes and allow students to do the same.
10. Compile a school "humor directory" that includes people's names and something humorous they can do or tell about to a class.
11. Analyze humorous literature for types of humor (for example, Amelia Bedelia taking things too literally).
12. For vocabulary development ask half the class to pantomime different smiles, while the other half guesses (for example, polite smile, grimace, grin, beam).
13. Put different laughs on cards, distribute them, and have students demonstrate (for example, guffaw, snicker, giggle, chortle, snort, cackle, chuckle).
14. Draw or pantomime nonliteral expressions (for example, shoplifting, cooking up a storm).
15. Parody television program titles or product names (for example, Crappy Days, Crust Toothpaste, Axwell House Coffee).

16. Make a chart of what makes people laugh: words, people, objects, events.
17. Create a funny "word wall" where students can tape up words such as zoot suit, bubble, burp.
18. Build a humorous learning center. See "Joke Center" in *Teacher* (March 1979) and "Limerick Center" in *Language Arts* (September 1976).
19. Have students keep a log of when and why they laugh.
20. Play tickle tag. Elementary students will enjoy tickling instead of tagging.
21. Do humor collages, for example, words, smiles, faces.
22. Collect humorous songs or songs that have something to do with humor and sing one a day, for example, "I Love to Laugh," "The Shadow of Your Smile," "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling," "When You're Smiling," and "Smile Awhile." Don't forget favorite camp songs like "The Ole Gray Mare," "On Top of Old Smokey," "Mares Eat Oats," and "Bill Grogan's Goat."
23. Give each student a humor-related word to look up in a large dictionary to determine its etymology (for example, laugh, chortle, giggle, smirk).
24. Study the history and science of humor. Every encyclopedia has a section on humor.
25. Investigate the possibility of having a physician speak on the physical changes laughter produces. (More and more doctors are becoming interested in humor's healing powers.)
26. Put a humorous item on each test.
27. Find humorous art (for example, Mona Lisa parodies). Explain/discuss parody.
28. Collect laughs on a tape recorder. Label and try to match to owners.
29. Collect humorous quotations and photos from newspapers.
30. Listen to humorous records (for example, Bill Cosby).
31. Set up a tongue-twister station for students to use when work is complete. Have students practice and record times on a graph. See Alvin Schwartz in bibliography.


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32. Start every Monday with something fun so students will look forward to coming to school, that is, BGIM (Be Glad It's Monday) instead of TGIF.
33. Use humorous sentences during spelling tests.
34. Practice punctuation by using unpunctuated jokes and limericks.
35. Have a backwards day. Run your schedule backwards, put some clothes on backwards, do last items on worksheets first, etc.
36. Have students research and then write biographies of comedians and authors of humorous works.
37. Take candid school shots with a camera and let students caption them.
38. Re-write fairy tales, myths, etc., in updated form.
39. Find humorous (safe) stunts that students can learn to do (for example, push potato across room with nose, roll eyes, wiggle ears, hambone rhythms).
40. Do creative writing or original riddles, jokes, tall tales, etc. (See *Journal of Reading* March 1981 and October 1982 and *Reading Teacher* 1982 for bibliographies.)
41. Learn signing of humor words as used by deaf people (for example, smile, laugh, etc.).
42. Study humor of different cultures and collect jokes and humorous stories from different countries.
43. Do a unit on humor using art, music, creative writing, speaking, listening, humorous literature.
44. Play a trick on the class each day by making something incongruous in the classroom that they must find.
45. Set up a display on humorous literature and authors in the library.
46. Have students collect and write "books" of Funny Family Folklore. Begin by having them ask parents, grandparents, and siblings to tell stories of funny things that happened to them.
47. Watch sit-coms and other television programs and list types and examples of humor used.
48. Invite a comedian to speak to the class about how he or she prepares material. Perhaps this could be coordinated with a career day.

49. Give the humor questionnaire below and share the results with the class.

**Find Your Funny Bone**

1. Humor is _____.
2. On a 1 to 10 scale my sense of humor is _____ (rate 10 as excellent and 1 as nonexistent).
3. My favorite comedian/comedienne is _____.
4. _____ is funny to me.
5. A funny thing that happened to me was _____.
6. I laughed until I cried when _____.
7. My laugh could be described as _____.
8. _____ has a memorable laugh.
9. _____ snorts when he or she laughs.
10. My favorite joke is _____.
11. I hate it when someone laughs when _____.
12. People are funny who _____.
13. Babies are funny when _____.
14. A funny thing I heard a child say was _____.
15. I am ticklish when _____.
16. The last time I blooped was _____.
17. I had to laugh at myself when _____.
18. _____ makes me laugh.

## The Punch Line

*He who laughs, lasts.*

—Norwegian Proverb

*The fellow who laughs last may laugh best, but he gets the reputation of being a dumb bell.*

Humor is a great liberator. It frees thought and suspends the rules of time, place, logic, and conduct. Yes, humor in the classroom does have its dangers. If it occurs at the wrong moment, it can destroy a mood or distract attention; if it gets out of hand, it can turn a classroom into a circus; and if it ridicules (like sarcasm can), feelings can be hurt. Humor can be used for good or bad, to delight, or to devastate. But it is only those who cling to rigidity and conformity who fear humor. As Koestler said, "Dictators fear laughter more than bombs" (Koestler 1979).

Somewhere, somehow, students must learn to use humor appropriately so they can enjoy its many benefits. Teachers with a sense of humor bring joy to themselves and show students a side of being human. Teachers that share humorous personal anecdotes, read humorous literature aloud, and laugh at students' jokes demonstrate to their students that they are capable of a range of other emotions, which will withstand the stress of those "terrible horrible no-good very bad days."

The power of humor could not be more eloquently expressed than in the words of a great American humorist who has made generations laugh at themselves and others. In one of his unfunny books, *The Mysterious Stranger*, Mark Twain writes:

> your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon – laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution – these can lift at the colossal humbug – push it a little – weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.



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