



MAKE 'EM LAUGH (& THEY'LL LEARN A LOT MORE)

Humor helps learning stick, says the teacher-author of *32 Third Graders and One Class Bunny*. By Phillip Done

When I was in fifth grade, my teacher, Mrs. Murayama, used to stop in the middle of a lesson and ask, “Did I show you the disappearing leg trick?” (She had already shown us a dozen times.) Then she’d put down her chalk and pick up her jacket. Holding the jacket in front of her legs, she’d lift it and one leg behind it at the same time. Voilà! Her leg disappeared! We’d crack up and then get back to multiplying.

Now that I am a teacher myself, I often think back on the teachers from my childhood who made a lasting impression on me. One quality that

they all shared was a sense of humor. Learning and laughter go hand in hand. In second grade, I had a difficult time learning how to spell the word *because*, then Miss Greco showed me that “Baby Elephants Can Always Understand Small Elephants.” After that, I never forgot it.

We teachers certainly don’t need to be stand-up comedians and spew out one-liners, or dress up like the clown-nosed doctor Patch Adams (though it’s not a bad idea once in a while). But a little comedy can bring a lot of joy and learning opportunities to the classroom. If you’re not used to getting laughs, April is a perfect month to give it a try, starting

out as it does with April Fool’s Day.

So here’s my quick guide to life as a funny teacher. Try one idea. Try them all. Do whatever feels comfortable for you. Be natural. If your students are smiling, giggling, laughing, howling, or even falling out of their chairs—you can be sure that you’re on the right track.

1 Tell Stories

Share anecdotes from your own childhood. I tell my students about the time I was two and was driving my mom crazy because I wouldn’t stop fussing. She plopped me down next to a loaf of raisin bread, and told me to pick out all the raisins. I did, and my mom had 15 minutes of peace. Warning: Any story you tell about yourself they will share that night with their parents.

2 Make Funny Noises

Make sounds (clicks, buzzes, rings) that stand for periods, commas and exclamation marks like the late, great entertainer Victor Borge did. It will enliven any writing or grammar lesson. >>

make 'em laugh

3 Break the Routine

Pause for a station break in the middle of a lesson. Stand and stretch. Fall on the floor and pretend you can't get up.

4 Use Different Voices

Sing "B-I-N-G-O" operatically. Speak in an accent. Make sure that Charlotte's voice is different from Wilbur's.

5 Weave Their Names Into Work

Type funny math problems and insert students' names (or your own). "If Mr. Done buys 300 hamburgers and eats 199 of them, how many are left?" You'll catch their attention and get them interested.

6 Play Dumb

Pretend you've never heard of Britney Spears. Ask students who she is. Watch heads shake. Do the same for the Xbox.

7 Never Be Sarcastic

Direct humor at *yourself*, not at your

students. They'll look forward to your jokes and jests rather than dread them.

8 Surprise Your Students

In the middle of a lesson say, "Pencils down, follow me." Lead them out the door and play outside for five minutes.

9 Create Hooks

Seven times seven equals the San Francisco 49ers. "Great" has the word *eat* in it. You can remember the order of the planets by memorizing "My Very Elegant Mother Just Sat on Nine Pickles." Mnemonics are not only great memory tools, but work to liven up a lesson.

10 Use Cartoons

Begin a lesson with a related cartoon on the overhead. Plaster the file cabinet or the door with comics. Invite students to bring them in. They'll discover how much what you're teaching them spills over into the real world.

11 Act Things Out

One desk is a floating iceberg. Two desks pushed together under a sheet make a covered wagon. Three desks pushed together is the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: Tape paper under the desks and paint like Michelangelo.

12 Be Outrageous

Stand on a chair once in a while. Let students stand on their chairs when reciting a poem or singing a song. Want them to sing it louder? Let them stand on their desks.

13 Horse Around During Recess

Throw your dignity out the window. Don't just stand on the sidelines and watch them on the playground—play with them. But be careful. Once when I was playing with my students, my pants ripped from my belt buckle to my back loop and I had to wear two sweatshirts around my waist for the rest of the day.

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14 Buy Joke Books
Fill your classroom library with humor books. Buy a new one each year. Get as many *Garfield* titles as you can.

15 Leave Secret Messages
Whenever I'm out I write the following on the whiteboard: "Dear Mice, Be good while I'm gone today. I'm sick. Love, The Cat."

16 Use Props
Wigs and hats and funny glasses can turn the dulllest of lessons into magic.

17 Be Silly
Fall down on the floor. Pretend the ruler is a microphone. Hula-dance. Scream "April Fool's!" in October.

18 Dress Up
One lab coat from Goodwill and you're Albert Einstein. A couple of paintbrushes sticking out of your pocket and

few bandages on your left ear and you're Vincent van Gogh.

19 Draw Badly
Draw one thing on the board really poorly. Say the Metropolitan Museum of Art offered you \$5 million for it.

20 Laugh at Yourself
When you walked out to your car this morning and discovered that your battery was dead because you left the lights on, tell your class about it. You are teaching them to not take things so seriously. I always tell my students about the time I got my tie caught in the laminator. I thought I was going to die!

21 Learn One Magic Trick
If you can't think of a trick, I'm sure Mrs. Murayama wouldn't mind if you used hers. Directions: Put jacket in front of

legs, raise jacket and leg at same time. Repeat every few weeks.

I remember hating subtraction until I had Miss Greco. She used to wave goodbye to the numbers on the chalkboard before she borrowed and carried them. Sometimes she even pretended to cry as she crossed them out. The whole class would laugh out loud. Suddenly subtraction became far less threatening.

As teachers we want to motivate our students. We want to create an atmosphere of openness and respect. We want them to feel comfortable and happy. We want them to take risks. We want them to get along with others. We want them to be active learners. Using humor helps facilitate all of this. What are you waiting for? Go ahead and give it a try! □



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