

# USING HUMOR



## in the Classroom

**A**lthough many educators instinctively use humor while teaching, its impact in the classroom is a relatively recent area of research compared with many other aspects of education. Humor in the form of jokes, cartoons, funny stories, videos, or photos has been shown to bring about a variety of positive results. The use of humor has been recommended for virtually every grade level from preschool to university, and for various subjects—including language arts, reading, math, statistics, science, and psychology. It has been examined in a variety of classroom contexts including online courses, classes for gifted children, Montessori schools, and individual tutoring, as well as more typical classroom settings. The goals of this article are to review

some of the benefits of the use of humor in the classroom, and to offer some specific ideas and guidelines, as well as some cautions on the use of humor by teachers.

### General Benefits of Humor

Many researchers and educators have suggested a wide range of benefits connected to the use of humor in the classroom:

- Humor can help create a positive environment that is conducive to learning<sup>1</sup> because it can help capture and retain students' attention in the classroom.<sup>2</sup>
- It may reduce stress or anxiety.<sup>3</sup>
- Humor can improve attitudes, boost morale, and even increase self-esteem.<sup>4</sup>

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- Humor can enhance or increase student motivation and engagement.<sup>5</sup>

- Humor can also promote a sense of acceptance in the classroom that allows students to think in creative and divergent ways.<sup>6</sup>

- Several researchers have demonstrated that humor is related to increased comprehension and improved understanding of course materials<sup>7</sup> and even to higher final exam scores.<sup>8</sup>

- Humor may help students to discover “universal truths” or see information in a new and different way.<sup>9</sup>

- Humor can set up a less-adversarial relationship between the teacher and students.

vation in Proverbs 17:22 that “a cheerful heart is good medicine!”

## Using Humor With Different Ages and Grade Levels

### Preschool

Gartrell says that using humor with young children can help them see their teacher as understanding and gracious, and it may help ease the tension when behavior problems cause a conflict. He also recommends humor for easing preschoolers’ fears in some situations—for example, a thunderstorm outside the classroom may seem less scary if the children are singing funny songs or laughing at stories.<sup>14</sup>

### Elementary and Middle School

At this level, humor can be used to make points related to specific academic subjects. It has been shown to improve reading and writing skills,<sup>15</sup> and can even help develop critical-thinking habits.<sup>16</sup> Children can begin to develop their own humor-related skills at a young age—such as making up jokes or games related to the course materials. Be sure to keep in mind the developmental level of the student—children in the concrete operational stage (younger than about age 12) may not understand humor requiring more abstract thinking such as sarcasm or irony.<sup>17</sup>

### High School

As with younger children, humor can be used at this level to make points related to course content. These students can also create humor related to the curriculum, such as drawing cartoons or even filming humorous videos. Because adolescents often worry that people are watching or judging them, make sure to use humor in a comfortable, non-threatening manner in which nobody is singled out or mocked.

### College/University

Professors at the college or university level may see humor as inimical to learning (often to the dismay of their students).<sup>18</sup> In one survey, many college students could not name even three teachers they regarded as having demonstrated a sense of humor.<sup>19</sup> In particular, these researchers noted, English teachers are often stereotyped as humorless. By contrast, when surveyed, 96 percent of students said they would use humor if they were professors. Torok and colleagues suggested: “Instead of hiding behind tortoise shell glasses, or worse, a tortoise shell, illustrate that humans with a sense of humor have invaded the ivory tower.”<sup>20</sup>

Research has shown that the use of humor can actually improve students’ performance, particularly in “dreaded classes,” such as college-level statistics.<sup>21</sup> Students indicate that humor can actually increase their level of attentiveness and help them learn course material.



**“It’s called ‘reading.’ It’s how people install new software into their brains.”**

- Students indicate that the use of humor makes teachers more likeable.<sup>10</sup>

Gordon has suggested an additional benefit for teachers: “When teachers are able to transcend their immediate, self-centered perspective and to view themselves from the standpoint of others (perspectives that are often humorous), they are likely to become more humble, honest, open-minded, and patient in their interactions with their students.”<sup>11</sup>

A recent review article summarized much of the literature on the topic of humor in education and generally endorsed the use of appropriate, relevant humor in classrooms.<sup>12</sup>

It should be noted that the Master Teacher also used humor at times to make a point. In many of His stories, Jesus used intentional exaggeration that must have seemed amusing to His listeners. In Luke 18:25, He asserted that “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (NIV).<sup>13</sup> In Matthew 23:24, He scolded the Pharisees by saying: “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” Jesus was not actually claiming that the Pharisees were actually eating camels; rather, He was using hyperbole to get their attention and make a point in a humorous way. He may even have been considering the obser-

Teacher: "If  $1 + 1 = 2$  and  $2 + 2 = 4$ , what is  $4 + 4$ ?"

Pupil: "That's not fair!  
You answer the easy ones  
and leave us with the  
hard one!"

Lei and colleagues listed many psychological, social, and cognitive benefits from the use of humor in college classrooms. According to these authors, the psychological benefits include improved mental and physical health, alleviation of negative emotions, and enhanced student self-perception. Social benefits include improved classroom morale, better relationships between students and professors, reduced tension, and a more relaxed atmosphere. Educational benefits include increased interest, attention, problem-solving, and creativity.<sup>22</sup>

Humor can take many forms at the college or university level. Students can be encouraged to identify humorous stories, cartoons, photos, videos, or even songs related to the subject matter. In my psychology and child-development courses, students often share funny videos or cartoons that are related to the topics we discuss in the course.

## Ways to Use Humor

### Jokes

Tell content-related jokes that can help students understand or relate to concepts presented in class. In some cases, jokes may be used simply to relieve stress or to make the teacher seem more approachable. For example, an elementary school math teacher might tell the following joke:

Teacher: "If  $1 + 1 = 2$  and  $2 + 2 = 4$ , what is  $4 + 4$ ?"

Pupil: "That's not fair! You answer the easy ones and leave us with the hard one!"<sup>23</sup>

Although the joke is obviously silly, younger students will

likely laugh, setting a positive tone for the classroom. Another example is this spelling joke:

Little Johnny wasn't a very good speller. One day, during a spelling exam, the teacher wrote the word *new* on the blackboard.

"Now," she asked Johnny, "what word would we have if we placed a 'k' in the front?"

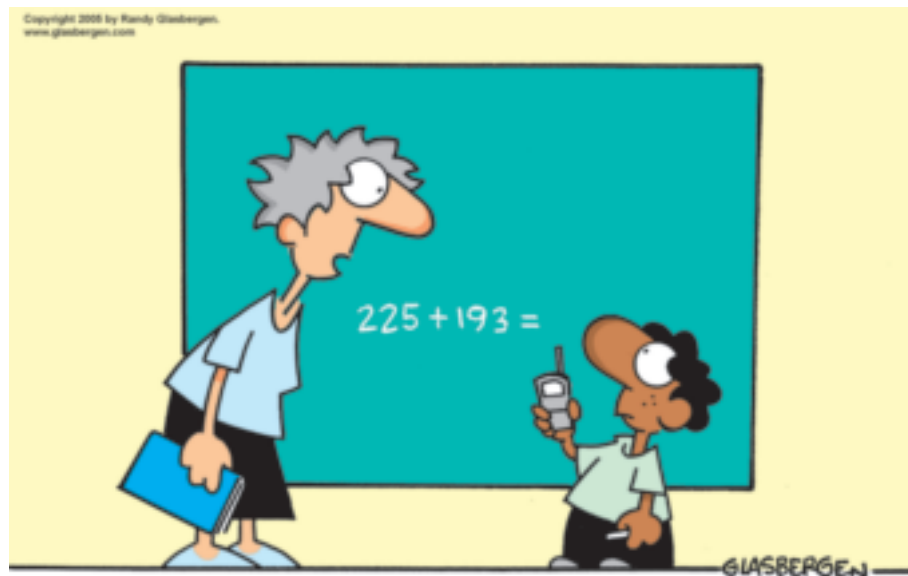
After thinking a few seconds, Johnny said, "Canoe?"<sup>24</sup>

In this case, the joke can be used to introduce the topic of silent letters. The use of *relevant* humor (humor that makes a point about the topic under discussion) has been shown to be more advantageous to learning than the use of random or unrelated humor.<sup>25</sup>

Teachers can find numerous examples of jokes on a variety of topics on the Internet (see the list of Websites at the end of this article). Some teachers do not feel comfortable or confident telling jokes. If you are among this group, there are plenty of other ways to incorporate humor in the classroom.

### Stories

Humorous stories are another way to engage students in the course material. In researching material for my university-level child-development courses, I have found an abundance of stories related to children and families in books and



**"You have to solve this problem by yourself. You can't call tech support."**

on the Internet. In some cases, I've shared stories from my own experience or from people I know. Students may also have stories to share—I have found that many of my students are eager to tell about their hilarious younger siblings, cousins, nieces or nephews, or even their own children. Be

sure to caution students not to tell stories that would cause embarrassment if the identity of the person was known to the class!

### Cartoons

If you use an overhead or PowerPoint projector for your class, cartoons can be easily included among your regular lecture slides. Again, the Internet is a fruitful source of cartoons on a wide variety of topics (see resource list at the end of this article). Be sure to check the copyright information for any cartoons you include in your materials. Many Websites post copyright information that indicates the cost of the cartoon and

### Use Your Students as Resources

In my child development and psychology classes, once my students learn that I am always on the lookout for humor, they often find photos or cartoons and send them to me to use in my slides. I also encourage my students to create their own humor. Gadanidis et al. have listed several ideas for introducing humor into middle school math classes, which include having students create their own math-related comics, compose poems about math, act out skits, or even write advertisements for math concepts. For example, these researchers suggest having students create “interviews” with geometric shapes (e.g., As a circle, “does it bother you that you don’t have any vertices?”).<sup>26</sup>



**“At home I have The History Channel, Discovery Channel, Smithsonian Channel, Science Channel, Biography Channel, Animal Planet, and PBS. School is interfering with my education!”**

how to order it. For example, Cartoonstock.com allows use of its cartoons by one teacher in a nonprofit school for \$12 each.

### Videos

Youtube.com is a great resource for funny videos on a variety of topics. I have also found several clips from popular situation comedies that students seem to enjoy. Brief clips from many shows are available on the network Websites. Some of the shows may include material that certain students might find offensive, so be sure to screen the clips carefully.

### Photos

Funny photos are an excellent way to illustrate many different types of concepts in the classroom. Some classes, such as child development or psychology, are quite easy to illustrate with humorous photos—but you may have to work harder to find, for example, funny math photos. Be on the lookout for things to photograph yourself, use photos you already have, or search the Internet for appropriate photos. Again, keep in mind any relevant copyrights that may apply.

### Cautions

In his article on the benefits of humor in general as well as in the classroom, Gordon warns that while humor can have many beneficial effects, it can also have unintended negative consequences.<sup>27</sup> A teacher’s jokes or self-deprecating humor can make students feel uncomfortable and perhaps cause them to mistrust the teacher’s abilities. Gordon offers this cautionary statement:

“[H]umor is really no different than many other interventions and techniques that teachers use (such as pushing their students to work harder or critiquing their ideas), which can have both positive and negative effects. Experience shows that there is often a fine line between the sensible use of humor and laughter and their overuse or misuse. An expert teacher usually

knows when humor is called for and how not to cross this line.”<sup>28</sup>

Flowers<sup>29</sup> has created some guidelines for the use of humor in teaching. For example, do not use inappropriate humor, such as telling offensive jokes or making fun of students. Keep in mind that different things may be considered offensive by students from various cultures, so avoid comments that could be regarded as insensitive to any specific student or ethnic group, or to the class in general. Flowers, along with others already mentioned, says that humor that is used to make points about specific course content works better than random or “aimless” humor. Also, as previously mentioned, teachers need to be aware of the developmental level of their students to ensure that they will understand and appreciate the humor employed. Flowers suggests that teachers should be just as willing to laugh at themselves as to joke about other people.

Finally, be careful not to turn the classroom into a “comedy club” where students are not sure whether any of the material can be taken seriously. Lei and colleagues caution that excessive humor can have damaging consequences such as undermining



**General cartoons:**

<http://www.cartoonstock.com>  
<http://www.basicjokes.com/>

**Cartoons for or about teachers and/or education:**

<http://www.crazy4teachers.com/>  
<http://jokes4teachers.com/>  
[http://www.danscartoons.com/education\\_cartoons.htm](http://www.danscartoons.com/education_cartoons.htm)  
<http://offthemark.com/search-results/key/classroom/>  
 The Math Humor Page: [http://www.dctech.com/physics/humor\\_math.php](http://www.dctech.com/physics/humor_math.php)

the credibility of the teacher, making students feel self-conscious, bored, or frustrated, or a loss of focus on the purpose of the instruction.<sup>30</sup>

**Summary/Conclusion**

Research suggests that classroom humor, when used appropriately, can produce a variety of benefits. Although teachers may sometimes struggle to get students to take learning seriously, paradoxically the use of appropriate humor enhances learning in many types of situations. So, try introducing some humor—even in small doses. Students will appreciate the effort, and you will likely find your time in the classroom more enjoyable as well! ✍



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