

The Lighter Side of Learning

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Educators are frequently in search of better and more stimulating methods of communicating content information, with the aim of helping students to learn, remember, and apply subject matter knowledge. While in this context teachers' mastery of subject matter is critical to the success of the teaching/learning process, research has shown that the way information is presented and communicated to students can have an impact on their learning. Researchers have outlined various strategies, such as cooperative learning; problem-based learning; and role-play, incorporating visual aids in conjunction with song, dance, and drama, which can be effectively used to help students assimilate and retain information. One strategy that is particularly helpful in both capturing students' attention and getting them involved in classroom learning is humour. It is a form of communication that is highly valued in most societies and, historically, it has been known to ease the tensions of the troubled world since the days of court jesters.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *humor* as “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating something that is comical, amusing or absurdly incongruous.” By extension, therefore, classroom humour involves incorporating funny, amusing, or comical situations or scenarios in classroom instruction to encourage and promote students' engagement, involvement, and participation in classroom activities. It is not the conversion of the classroom into a circus but, rather, it is teachers' attempts to make the learning process fun while maintaining “serious” learning outcomes. It is not about simple joke-telling; it is about using, carefully, well-thought-out and well-planned content-specific humour that adds to the learning experiences within the classroom.

Classroom humour is most effective when it is appropriate to the listening audience (students), strongly related to the topic being discussed or presented, and contextualised within the learning experience. It can take the form of jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, and humorous comments. Definitions, for example, can be easily retained by using humour to create metacognitive dissonance, as in the case of the definition of *biennial*—a plant that comes up and dies twice a year [humorous definition]. Of course, this is not the definition of biennial [a plant that flowers the first year and dies the second year], but students would easily remember the “correct” definition through the mental association made with the “humorous definition.”

An activity such as having students share their “silliest” moment at the start of the term or the year can be an excellent icebreaker to reduce stress and to facilitate peer bonding and creativity.

Prof. Viviane Robinson claims that humour serves the psychological function of relieving anxiety and tension. It creates a less intimidating environment and allows students to become better listeners. It can also serve as an outlet for hostility and anger, offer an escape from reality, and lighten the heaviness often related to classroom instruction. Other researchers have claimed that “humor can enhance learning and retention” but only if it has “a high degree of resonance for the listener,” that is to say, “students must be able to recognize the meaning that is being conveyed and its relevance to the issue at hand.” The humour must be based on something that is familiar to the students if it is to offer maximum effectiveness to the learning situation.

In using humour in teaching, however, it is important to recognise that differences in culture, age, religious beliefs, gender, and other distinctions can influence how the humour is received and perceived and, so, careful consideration must be given to the choice of humour, the extent to which it is used, and the range of interpretations that can be derived from the strategy. Additionally, the selected humour should be “clean”—devoid of any rude or embarrassing insinuations—particularly when used in the classroom setting to promote learning.

Educator and researcher Doris Bergen suggests that teachers who use strategies that promote the “connection between humor and learning usually provide students with their best school experiences.” Furthermore, Bergen says that “the use of humor creates a less intimidating environment; one that is more relaxed and one that allows the students to become better listeners.”

Teachers are powerful role models in the classroom and, as such, they can use appropriate humour in the classroom to promote and enhance a sense of community among students. This is likely to result in increased levels of comprehension and cognitive retention, and, of equal importance, a more enjoyable class for the students **and** the teacher.

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