Humour In The Classroom

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Introduction

The use of humour as an educational tool has been investigated since the 1930s (e.g., Perl, 1933) and in recent years a number of researchers (e.g., Dodge and Rossett, 1982) have suggested that it can be a useful tool in the classroom. That classrooms could be places where children can have fun and teaching and learning is "fun" for both teachers and children and that in fact lessons/homework/examinations should sometimes be "funny" is a concept that is becoming quite alien in this age of emphasis on examinations, inputs, outputs and quality of products. Indeed the task of teaching and learning is not generally associated with fun and laughter.

Yet, in *The Art of Teaching* Highet wrote that:

One of the most important qualities of a good teacher is humor. Many are the purposes it serves. The most obvious one is that it keeps the pupils alive and attentive because they are never quite sure what is coming next... the real purpose of humor in teaching is deeper and more worthy. It is to hook the pupils and the teacher and to link them through enjoyment.

I believe in the use of humour. I believe in "hooking" my students to the subject I teach and I find that often as I search for cartoons/humourous materials I become "hooked."

I believe that teaching will be less stressful and children less stressed if humour is introduced into the classroom. If teachers and children can share a joke and have a good laugh together, it will not only reduce anxiety (Freud, 1928; Spencer, 1960) but researchers have even claimed that it can contribute to clearer thinking (Cousins, 1979); foster cognitive development (Walker and Goodson, 1971); increase attention and interest in a topic (Gruner, 1970; Markiewicz, 1974); motivate, reduce dullness and encourage discussion (Gibb, 1964); increase creative thinking in adolescents (Ziv, 1976); create a
positive classroom environment (Bateson, 1969) and help in the management of undesirable behaviour (Linfield, 1977).

Many see laughter as "internal jogging". The end result is a lessening of tension and an increase in energy. Simonton (1980) even wrote about the healing power of play and laughter. Indeed to Kuhlman (1984) the ability to laugh (and play) is an essential characteristic of a fully functioning person.

Why And How Humour Can Be Used

As humour helps in developing insight and inferencing skills, it might be helpful for teachers to consider it as one of the many possible tools or an extra "gadget" in the classroom. By using riddles, puns and jokes, children can be helped to see the "other" meanings associated with words. Through a "playful experimentation" with words much can be achieved in a reading lesson as such play on words require fairly complex linguistic skills and a certain amount of creativity. Whitmer gave the following example:

Police police police picnic.

What does one make of this? Try this with your class and you will be amazed at what the children will come up with. There will certainly be a lot of class participation and discussion as the children grapple with the meaning of the words and the different parts of speech. A local version, albeit only for those who speak my dialect (Hokkien) goes like this:

Ah Kong Kong Kong Kong Kong Kong.

(To assist those of you who may have problem with this, the parts of speech involved are: noun, verb, noun, verb, noun, noun.) Through this the teacher can teach intonation and syntax. To Whitmer,
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Word play offers children much expression in categorizing as they discern likeness and differences, compare and contrast meanings, and evaluate what is appropriate and inappropriate to the situation.

To be able to understand riddles, puns and jokes children need to understand multiple meaning of words, metaphors, idioms and to see connections sometimes in the most unlikely ways as seen here:

O
BA
MEd
MA
PhD

It would take a fair bit of thought for the student to conclude that the above simply means 4 degrees below zero! Or “side side” means “side by side” and “you/just/me” means “just between you and me.” Riddles such as:

Q: Why do golfers wear 2 pairs of pants?
A: In case they get a hole in one.

Q: What did the road say to the bridge?
A: You make me cross.

(source unknown)

are thought provoking and children may become divergent thinkers. They need the ability to detect the nuances and the ambiguities.

Cartoons with puns on words are also very effective teaching aids. One of my favourite is:
Students could be asked to supply catchphrases to pictures, e.g.,

*(race against time) (bottom drawer)*

*LONG OVERDUE* (Long Overdue) *(Missing Dog)* (last show, side show, end of show)
And a sentence which I have used a lot in my teaching is:

FINISHED FILMS ARE THE RESULT
OF YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC
STUDY COMBINED WITH THE
EXPERIENCE OF YEARS WORK.

(source unknown)

When asked to count the number of “Fs” in this sentence the majority would say emphatically that there are 3 of them. Generally I have students read the sentence 4 times and even after the 4th time there were many who insisted that there were three. A particular student was so sure that she was right that she put a $200 bet on it. What a good way it was for me to bring management issues into the lesson!

Other ways to use humour in class would be to have students write captions for cartoons, write comic rhymes, draw funny pictures and even give humourous definitions. An example of a definition for rheumatism given to me was: “Twinges on the hinges.”

Older students can be encouraged to experiment with words. For instance we have seen the IE Director’s version of supervision – super VISION and SUPER vision. Others have used SnooperVision, Snoopvision and scoopervision. I have said supervision was seen as a super VICE, and that today we have trained our Heads of Department to zero in with super VISORS. Many other words lend themselves to fascinating experimentation, e.g., PARTICIPATE.

The possibilities of using humour in the classroom are limitless. Very often we limit ourselves. The ability to understand and appreciate humour could be seen as a useful index of cognitive development (McGhee, 1971). I have used a lot of cartoons, jokes with the students I teach and I remember instances when the cartoons or jokes fell flat because the students were not able to appreciate the subtleties of the language. For this to be appreciated, they must first be understood. Baughman (1979) said “cerebral exercise” is required.
Other examples that could be used to teach or to facilitate students' observation power or just for a good laugh are humourous anecdotes, humourous films and one of my favourite is doodles. Doodles are drawings which can be interpreted to mean a number of things. Children could be encouraged to doodle and to share them with the class. This will not only provide some comic relief in the classroom but can also provide a slot for them to share their creative ideas or thoughts. Let me share with you one of my favourite doodles:

(A possible answer: the backview of a woman scrubbing the floor.)

The French author Anatole France wrote at the turn of the century: "Let our teaching be full of ideas. Hitherto it has been stuffed with facts." And Ashley Montague noted: "In teaching it is the method and not the content that is the message . . . the drawing out, not the pumping in." The great teacher Socrates saw himself as a “midwife” to his students. His job was to deliver or to bring forth what was already there. And before one can “draw out” or “deliver” one needs to create an atmosphere that is conducive for this process to take place. Humour can be used to relax students who are nervous and uptight. It can make the classroom a less threatening place, a place where students are prepared to take risks, to experiment, to share and to participate. Students can become actively involved in their own learning. The use of humour can help teachers establish rapport with students, because humour connects, humour helps to build bridges and to close the gap. Baughman (1979) noted: "When people of all ages, races, religions and politics laugh and become exuberant together, all differences for the moment are removed."
As humour can reduce tension, researchers have looked into other ways that it can be used in the class, e.g., the possibility of using it in examinations. Dixon (1980) suggested that humour is a response incompatible with anxiety, therefore humourous items in examinations may serve to decrease students' anxiety and thus improve test scores. This was the finding reported by Adams (1972). Smith, Ascough, Ettinger and Nelson (1971) suggested that the introduction of humour can facilitate performance by relaxing highly anxious students. However Townsend and Mahoney (1981) found that humourous items in a test decreased the performance of highly anxious students but increased the performance of the less anxious students, possibly because the addition of the humourous items increased the anxiety of the already very anxious students. It is important that teachers use humourous questions with care. They must ensure that the humour does not distract the students.

No study has been conducted in Singapore where this is concerned. However a couple of teachers have started using fairly humourous test questions. I personally feel that some humourous or slightly unusual questions could be used in some of the primary school tests.

Because children's attention span is shorter, a humourous examination question added to a test paper could generate a fair bit of energy. Some primary six science papers consist of 25-30 pages. However, it must be stated that the papers are packed with diagrams, but an 11 year old faced with such a stack of papers could do with some humourous items.

In the pages which follow I have put together some questions which to me do contain some humourous elements. The questions are not meant for any specific grade level and some do have a nonsensical element.

1) When Snow White bit the poisoned apple given by her stepmother, what type of teeth did she use?

2) If Jack's mother had not thrown the beans out of the window and had cooked them instead, what food value would there be in that meal?
3) When Prince Charming kissed Snow White and she awoke, what do you think possibly happened?

a) cardiac pulmonary resuscitation
b) extraction of carbon dioxide
c) pumping in oxygen

4) When Prince Charming kissed Snow White what muscles were used?

5) Question: Which area (A or B) is more suitable for plant growth? Why?
6) Question: Why would the title "Death of a Salesman" be appropriate for this particular salesman?

Such humourous examination questions might perk the students up and give them the additional boost to help them complete the examination. Humour to me is a form of caring. When our lessons drag and we see the low energy level among the students, we crack a joke or flash a cartoon on the OHP to give the students the little extra energy to keep awake. Humour can also enhance learning as students will be attracted to attend to the lesson.
Implications For Teachers

In view of the benefits of using humour, I would suggest that teachers think about using this tool. The ability to use humour is a skill which can be acquired. I am not asking that teachers create humour (though it will be very exciting if they do so), but rather we use or present humour created by others just as we have been presenting theories/principles created or discovered by others. This skill can be learnt through observation and practice. But first teachers must learn to appreciate humour, to let go and to laugh at themselves and with the students.

One of the first steps therefore would be for teachers to start collecting humourous materials. This collection should be ongoing. Next, the teacher should start introducing humourous materials slowly to the class. (Be adventurous!) For a start, we could use cartoons, humourous illustrations which should focus on the content of the lesson. (One however has to note that there are boundaries to humour and also the correct use of humour.) School based workshops on “The use and abuse of humour in teaching” could be organised and teachers who have used humour in teaching could be invited to share with others. This skill can be taught or caught as humour is contagious.

Conclusion

It is because I see a lot of benefits for the use of humour that I suggest the incorporation of humour into formal classroom learning experiences and into examinations, if possible. If learning and teaching is fun and thought provoking, students and teachers will be keen to study and to come to school.

I believe that the use of humour will benefit the teaching profession by “enhancing the quality of teachers’ lives” (Powell and Andresen, 1985). The two researchers wrote:

Teaching is an exacting and often unrewarding activity which may be made more sustainable if the teacher is able to derive satisfaction from arousing a positive response from students through the use of humour.
They suggested that humour might even have therapeutic value for teachers. To me, seeing others laugh at cartoons/jokes is extremely energizing and therapeutic to me as it encourages me in my teaching.

If we can build humour into the classroom and not reserve it only for the playgrounds and canteens, schools would not only be fun but I believe it would contribute to more expressions of divergent thinking and would lead to freer interaction in the classroom benefiting both teachers and students.

References


Whitmer, J.E. Pickles will kill you: use humourous literature to teach critical reading.