

Brain-Friendly Humor in the Classroom

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” --Victor Borge



Learning is stronger and more efficient when the *process* is fun and engaging. Even though *learning* is serious and challenging, humor can make the *process* easier, more efficient, enjoyable, and more memorable.

Opening Class (first minute or two or while students are waiting for class to begin)

- Cartoons and funny signs projected on a screen
- Jokes and anecdotes (can be general, school-related, or subject specific)
- Other students' answers (from other subjects; nothing that would embarrass students)
- Word play: Mad-Libs, puns, dumb headlines, goofy directions on packages
- Funny print and video ads and other video clips (such as You Tube or JibJab.com videos)
- Music: comment on the weather, something with fun or funny lyrics

Reducing Stress

- Dab your eye and hand out tissues: “I know, I know. It’s sad...” (Exaggeration is funny; try this before a test, after giving a difficult assignment, or any time students feel put upon.)
- Before a test, hand out “pencils with the answers in them” or rubber bands for their wrists.
- Magic tricks: card, coin, rope, etc. No skill required: The more obvious, the better.
- Joke share: create a set of reusable laminated strips with short jokes in them.

Other Uses during Class

- Use humor to preempt or diffuse handle potentially unpleasant situations in a non-threatening way (e.g., “Laughable Lyrics” CD song; “I’m Dr. Elder’s computer grade book...”)
- Unexplained prop—black box, candle, snow dome, etc.—that ties in to the lesson (“a paragraph is like an artichoke because...”), or ask students in groups to come up with a connection (“How is a paragraph is like this chocolate chip cookie?”).
- Interesting pointers: wands, cooking utensils, back scratcher...
- Bits of costume: interesting ties, t-shirts, or hats; cape; feather boa. Sources: Oriental Trading Company, toy shops, after-Halloween sales, party supply stores, and army-navy stores
- Group or pair students in interesting ways.
- Allow a stumped student to “dial a friend” or “poll the audience.”
- Music:
 - As students move into groups (e.g., “Help”; “We Can Work It Out”).
 - When they finish collaborative work (e.g., “Thanks for the Memories”).
 - To set information to when it’s something important they need to remember.
 - When they begin a challenging topic or assignment (“Mission Impossible,” Jeopardy”) or complete a difficult class session or section of material (“Simply the Best,” “Hallelujah Chorus,” John Williams’ Olympic music).
- Unusual sounds—chimes, triangle—to let them know when only a minute more to work
- Have students say to a partner, “If it weren’t for you...I’d be the most [you supply the adjective] person in the room.”

Refocusing the Class

- “Would everyone in need of a change of pace, please signify by raising their eyelids?”
- Sound effects: recorded ones (e.g., snoring, time bomb) or your own (e.g., whistle, chimes)
- Toy telephone: great for “wake-up” calls and allowing a stumped student to “dial a friend”
- Give a 30-second weather report with a graphic; return immediately to topic at hand.

Giving Recognition

- Music (e.g., “Shout,” “Celebrate,” “We Are the Champions”)
- Standing ovation (for a student who has a major accomplishment, one who’s had a lousy day, a problem student you want to turn around...or if *you’re* having a lousy day and want a lift!)
- Group ooohs and aaahs
- Lightly “glitter” a student.
- Drum roll on desktops or tops of thighs

Ending Class

- End-of-class call-out (“Readers are leaders!” “See you next time. We can’t spell S_CCESS without U!”)
- Tell students goodbye each time with the same send off. (“Ya’ll come back, ya hear!” “Don’t be a stranger.” “Parting is such sweet sorrow.”)
- Music (e.g., “Never Can Say Goodbye,” “Who Let the Dogs Out,” “Happy Trails to You”)

Points to keep in mind:

- Laughter has physiological, psychological, cognitive, emotional, and social benefits.
- Laughter appears to be hardwired into the brain *as a bonding mechanism*.
- Laughter and humor facilitate learning by making it stronger, more engaging, more efficient and memorable; they facilitate communication, openness, rapport, and trust.
- Explain to students the reasons laughter and humor are brain-friendly.
- Don’t overuse humor: a little goes a long way.
- Use humor that fits your personality and teaching style.
- Remember that the unexpected delights the brain.
- Hurtful, sarcastic, off-color or other inappropriate humor is *never* okay.
- Laughter and humor benefit teachers as much as they do students!

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” Victor Borge, comedian



“Instead of working for survival of the fittest, we should be working for survival of the wittiest—then we can all die laughing.” Lily Tomlin, comedian

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND WEBLIOGRAPHY

Brain-Friendly Humor for the Classroom

Print Resources

- Carr, J. and L. Greeves (2006). *Only joking: What's so funny about making people laugh?* New York: Penguin Books.
- Critchley, S. (2002). *On humor*. New York: Routledge.
- Loomans, D. and K. Kolberg. (1993). *The laughing classroom*. Tiburon, CA: H J Kramer, Inc.
- Martin, R. (2006). *The psychology of humor*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Morreall, J. (1997). *Humor works*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press.
- Provine, R. (2000). *Laughter: A scientific investigation*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Sanders, T. (2005). *The likeability factor*. New York: Crown Publishers.

...and, of course, joke and blooper books, Jay Leno's *Headlines* books, humor anthologies, and books on juggling and magic tricks, and other books such as:

- Lansky, D. (compiler). (2005). *Signspotting: Absurd and amusing signs from around the world*. London: Lonely Planet Publications. This book is the first in the series.
- Newman, F. (2004). *MouthSounds*. New York: Workman Publishing.

Web Resources

Funny You Tube Videos

My Blackberry Is Not Working

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAG39jKi0II>

British comedy skit from the two Ronnies. Not only hilarious, but also useful for introducing context and the multiple meaning of words.

Stuck on an Escalator

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXCuGvsThEw>

A funny, nonthreatening way to launch a discussion on personal responsibility.

Blonde in the Library

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQTAU1WKpWQ&feature=related>

This Mercedes Benz ad has the tagline that "beauty without brains is nothing." It can be used in conjunction with making inferences (drawing conclusions).

The Mom Song

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nem0bkErGVY>

Set to the "William Tell Overture," this mom's song chronicles her daily dealings with her children. All students can relate to this, but it's a fun way to start a discussion about point of view. Can also be used to discuss patterns, such as sequence, comparison/contrast, and cause-effect.

Medieval Help Desk (with English subtitles)

http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=medieval+helpdesk&aq=f

This Norwegian version has been viewed more than 2.5 million times. Can be used to illustrate the importance of building background knowledge (prior knowledge) and to remind students that anytime we learn something new, there's a learning curve!

Bad Morning?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GezK6TXZKho>

A fun Monday class-opener, especially if it's a snowy winter day and your students aren't in the best mood! Also good for illustrating irony, drawing conclusions, and making predictions.

www.jibjab.com

This website features animated videos (e.g., downhill skiing, diving, dancing) and pictures in which celebrities' faces or an individual's face can be inserted. Some are free. Unlimited access is \$12/year. Students love it when instructors poke fun at themselves!

Information Resources

www.aath.org The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor; organization of professionals who incorporate humor into their daily lives; provides evidence-based research about current research and practical applications of humor

<http://apu.sfn.org> Home page of the Society for Neuroscience (publishes *The Journal of Neuroscience*, *Neuroscience Quarterly*, and *Brain Briefings*)

www.corsinet.com/baincandy G-rated humor, word play, one-liners, short jokes, and more; lots of links

www.dribbleglass.com Humor web site that includes "billboards we'd like to see" and funny photos. Some material is inappropriate for the classroom, however.

www.hnu.edu/ishs International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS), a scholarly and professional organization dedicated to the advancement of humor research. Membership includes many college and university professors, as well as management and counseling professional. Publishes a quarterly journal and newsletter; holds an annual conference. Home page has many links.

www.humormatters.com Psychologist and therapeutic humorist Steven Sultanoff's web site

<http://joe-ks.com> Many categories of jokes; also includes riddles, puns, funny photos, signs, multimedia and sound clips

Product Sources

www.OrientalTrading.com (1-800-857-8450) inexpensive novelties, pencils, costume pieces

www.PrankPlace.com Carries the **Sound Machine**, a small, inexpensive handheld device that produces 16 sound effects (applause, laughter, etc.)

www.trainerswarehouse.com Products for trainers and educators (including "**Laughable Lyrics**" CD, chimes and other sound-makers, and Sound F/X, handheld devices that produces several different sounds); training tips; free monthly email newsletter

Other

Laroche, L. (2002). *The joy of stress; Humor your stress* (60-minute, color DVDs). Boston: WGBH Video. Students love seeing excerpts from these energizing and hilarious stress management videotapes by author, humorist, and stress expert Laroche, and benefit from her insights on coping with stress. These DVDs can be ordered inexpensively from Amazon.com.

Excerpts from commercial DVDs, such as logs burning in a fireplace (In winter, show a few minutes of it to "warm up" the classroom. Hold your hands in front of the screen!)