

Using Humor in the Classroom

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"But why do I have to go? School is not fun!" That quote is from a first-grade child, asking his mom why he has to go every single day to this place that he was told was going to be a lot of fun, but has not lived up to the hype. If he could articulate further, he might say, "I am only six. I like to have fun, but school is not fun and from what I can tell, it's going to get worse every year, not better."

This is not an April Fool's Day anecdote; it's all too real. That's why we are always on the lookout for ways fun ways to engage and inspire students. On the other hand, we also know that teachers are not selected or trained to be comedians or entertainers. However, we know that a positive climate for learning, and enjoyment, is correlated with retention of information and putting knowledge to work in everyday situations (including tests).

Confused? Me, too. So I sought out an expert: Ed Dunkelblau, former president of the [Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor](#), Director of the Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning and consultant to schools for both character and social, emotional learning (SEL) approaches, as well as to families coping with the stress of military service. I spoke with him about how to bring humor into classrooms.

I asked Ed how humor can be fit in when teachers have so much to cover in their classes. He said, "In the present environment of high stakes testing, budgetary challenges, increased demands on educators and competition for students attention, everyone in the school benefits when humor is part of the pedagogy. Humor builds a learning relationship through the joyful confluence of head and heart." He points to a growing literature on how humor reduces stress and tension in the classroom, improves retention of information, and promotes creative understanding.

"But most of all, it brings a sense of pleasure and appreciation and creates a common, positive emotional

experience that the students share with each other and the teacher."

Humor Strategies to Use

Even if you are what Ed calls "humor challenged," there are things you can do to lighten the load and dissipate the clouds in your classroom. Just remember, above all, that sarcasm has no place in the school. Only "no hurt" humor is acceptable.

- Laugh at yourself -- when you do something silly or wrong, mention it and laugh at it.
- Add humorous items to tests, homework or class assignments -- even at the University, one of my favorite options when I give multiple choice exams requiring students to identify pairs of psychologists is Calamari and Endive. It always gets smiles, and helps to break exam tension.
- Keep a quotable quotes bulletin board or corner in your room -- look for humor quotes and post them and encourage your students to do the same.
- Keep a cartoon file, and have an area where you can display one or two a day on a rotating basis, with students making the choice.
- Have Joke Friday -- ask students to bring in jokes to share, either to start the day on Friday, to make a transition between lunch and the following class, or at the end of the day (be sure to screen the jokes in advance, of course).
- Ask students to try to build humor into occasional writing assignments -- that will start a conversation about what is funny, how they know something is funny, why different people find some things funny but some things are funny to almost everyone.
- Have a funny hat day, or mismatched socks day, or some other funny dress-up time.
- Build creative and humorous thinking by showing cartoons and picture without captions and asking students to create them -- individually, in pair-shares, or small groups.
- Ask students to bring in books they think are funny. Ask them to talk about why, and to use examples from the book.

Truth be told, however, there is another side to the story. Ed tells of a group of individuals who are not so enamored of bringing humor into classrooms and schools: private practice therapists. "The more laughs our society loses, the more humorless our society becomes, and the more clients our society creates. Laughter is a great antidote to stress. As they say at the AATH, "Those who laugh, last. Those who don't, pay a price." But really, it's the kids who pay the price, and they should not have to.

Let's add some more enjoyment to school. We don't need guffaws -- a smile and a little levity can go a long way. It's time for us educators to take humor more seriously. I am sure Ed will be happy to help you if you ask.

How do you bring humor in to your classroom? Please share in the comments section below.