



Winter 2011 | Number 67

Hot Topic 67

Using Humor to Maximize Learning



**BY: MARY KAY
MORRISON**



I have been to a lot of great places, but I've never been in Cahoots. Apparently you can't go alone. You have to be in Cahoots with someone. I've also never been in Cognito, either. I understand that no one recognizes you there. I have, however, been in Sane. They don't have an airfield; you have to be driven there. I have made several trips with the help of federal agents. I would like to go to Conclusions, but you have to jump ... I'm not sure I can do that anymore.

Are you in-cahoots with others about trying to survive the current education assessment and data driven challenges? Or are you currently in-cognito hoping to stay under the radar while assuming "this too may pass?" Some of you may feel you are in-sane from the stress of increasing requirements, common core standards and mandates.

Please take a trip with me to in-jest! It is a place like no other in education. I will warn you that some educators will not travel this road. A few are afraid to go because they fear punishment. Many believe that they do not have time to travel there, claiming that this is a hotbed of wasteful frivolity. Others are afraid of being made fun of so they will not try the trip. I promise that if you experience the place called in-jest, you will never want to leave!

Humorphobia (the fear of using humor) is evident in many of our schools. I have heard many stories from teachers about how their school inhibits humor and discourages fun. These stories from the trenches have increased my commitment to search for ways to bring laughter and happiness into our schools. I believe that learning should

My passion is to help educators improve their humor practice for the purpose of creating an optimal environment for learning, as well as to reduce the stress that seems to be rampant among teachers and students today.

be engaging and that humor is a vital component for creating a culture of joy!

During the course of my workshops on humor, many teachers have described the creative ways that they bring joyful learning to their students. Most educators love teaching and enjoy laughing with their students. However, it is rare to find teachers who purposefully use humor to maximize the learning process. I find it interesting that almost all educators agree that humor is essential for teachers, but it is unusual to find someone who intentionally uses humor as a tool to improve teaching and learning.

My passion is to help educators improve their humor practice for the purpose of creating an optimal environment for learning, as well as to reduce the stress that seems to be rampant among teachers and students today.

In order to enhance your humor practice, it is essential to review what we know about the emotions from current neuroscience. Fear is our most powerful emotion. It has the primary purpose of protecting us from harm. Humans are programmed to pay attention to fear because this emotion alerts us when our safety is threatened. Fear has been the focus of considerable cognitive research. Imaging technology makes it relatively easy to locate fear

in the amygdala and hippocampus regions of the brain. Fear signals danger and immediately alerts us to pay attention.

Since fear is critical to our survival, it is tempting to use this emotional response as a means to control the actions of others. Many of our organizations are driven by fear. Think about how we discipline and grade students, and even how we conduct extra curricular activities. Many policies, rules and regulations in schools are fear-based, as are federal and state mandates. What happens when your students “do not meet” on the state assessments? Data overload is stressing many of our educators. Excess fear causes chronic stress and according to Sapolsky this stress can actually kill us! He says that we are the only animal that can think itself to death! (Sapolsky, 1998)

If you want to read an eye-opening account of what stress can look like in the brain, check out my friend and colleague, Dr Earl Henslin’s book, *This is Your Brain On Joy*. (2008) Earl works at Amen Clinics in California, which has the mission of helping people with distressed brains to find balance. These clinics use sophisticated imaging technology to discover how to improve brain functions. His research highlights just how debilitating stress can be. (Henslin, 2008) Cognitive science is giving us significant information about the need for exercise, healthy diets and close relationships. We also know that the positive emotions are a critical component for healthy living. It’s a no-brainer that educators work in stressful conditions. They deal with high-stakes testing, overbearing parents, budget shortfalls, data overload and countless other pressures. (Radcliffe, 2011) I believe that the perfect antidote for stressed educators is a liberal dose of humor, fun, laughter and play.

What is Humor Exactly?

Can humor be defined? Is it something you are born with? I serve on the board of directors for AATH (Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor). The mission of this not-for-profit organization is to serve as the community of professionals who study, practice and promote healthy humor and laughter. The AATH definition of therapeutic humor is, “Any intervention that promotes health and wellness by stimulating a playful discovery, expression or appreciation of the absurdity or incongruity of life’s situations. This intervention may enhance health or be used as a complementary treatment of illness to facilitate healing or coping, whether physical, emotional, cognitive, social or spiritual.”

There have been lively discussions among humor researchers about the difference between laughter, humor,

and mirth. Many of these AATH members collaborated on a document called *Mirthium* that originated with Ron Berk, (2004). This document can be found on the AATH web site and provides a clear description of the differences between humor, mirth and laughter. Here is a brief synopsis:

- Humor is the cognitive perception of playful incongruity
- Mirth is the positive emotion that accompanies humor
- Laughter is the respiratory-vocal behavior that communicates this emotion to others

In this article, I will just use the term “humor” from here on to keep it simpler. I encourage readers to review the AATH web site for additional information about humor and laughter. <http://www.aath.org/>

Why Should Educators Be Interested in Humor?

What are the benefits of humor? Several of the researchers and members from AATH have worked together to develop a general list of the benefits of humor. I think that educators will agree that these benefits can provide significant advantages for teaching and learning.

I believe that the perfect antidote for stressed educators is a liberal dose of humor, fun, laughter and play.

Humor (when used appropriately and sensitively)

1. Reduces stress, anxiety, and tension
2. Promotes psychological well-being
3. Raises self-esteem
4. Improves interpersonal interactions & relationships
5. Builds group identity, solidarity, and cohesiveness
6. Enhances memory Mirth
7. Increases pain tolerance
8. Elevates mood
9. Increases hope, energy, and vigor
10. Counteracts depression and anxiety
11. Enhances creative thinking and problem-solving
12. Increases friendliness & helpfulness Laughter
13. Intensifies mirth
14. Is contagious (induces mirth in others)
15. Increases interpersonal attraction and closeness
16. Exercises respiratory muscles

WOW—How can you go wrong? Healthy humor, mirth and laughter provide enormous benefits for educators. Do travel to in-jest with me! Humor is a skill that can be improved with practice.

How Can You Use Humor to Maximize Learning?

I think that most teachers often use spontaneous humor, but what I am suggesting here is that humor be included in a purposeful way when planning your lessons. Do try the Hook, Line and Sinker approach to using! It is an “Educator Tackle Box” with purposeful inclusion of humor, fun, play and laughter in your lesson plans.

The Educator’s Tackle Box: Fishing for Humor — Hook, Line, and Sinker

The amazing thing about humor is that it has the capacity to hook student attention, put information into the short-term memory and thus increases the probability that the data will end up into the long-term memory.

The recent accountability movement including testing and standards have an important role in measuring what children learn. Unfortunately most of these mandates ignore HOW we learn. A review of brain research clearly

So reel in some fun by putting the hook, line, and sinker of humor in your tackle box!

indicates that the emotions are integral to the learning process. If a child is angry or fearful, there may be some short-term learning that occurs, but an education that emerges from fear and anger is laced with negativity towards knowledge and defeats the basic purpose of learning. It spawns students who think the purpose of education is to pass tests. Humor can have a significant role in the learning process while helping to reduce the stress and anxiety that many students (and teachers) experience in the assessment process.

Many teachers use humor as a hook. It grabs student attention. A brain that is not attending is simply not learning. Educators can integrate humor in every aspect of the learning process since it helps serve as a line to the short-term memory. The more often that line is cast the better chance the information will sink into the long-term memory. Using humor in the feedback and assessment process can further insure the information will “be caught”.

Put humor in your lesson plans with the hook, line and sinker approach. Here are some ideas from teachers that can be used in your K-12 classroom. You understand the needs of your students, so please feel free to adapt to your age group and topic. The idea is to think about how you can include humor in every aspect of your teaching.

I. PARENT FUN

- HOOK: Have students ask their parents about any science projects or other FUN projects that they did “way back” when they were in school. Most students will get a kick out of finding out what their parents did.
- LINE: Students will interview the parents about what they remember of their project and why the project was fun for them.
- SINKER: Have students present the findings from their parents including what they found to be exciting when they went to school. Invite students to do an update on the current research on this project. What have we learned in the past 15+ years about the topic? Ask students what is the most FUN they have had in the learning process in school.

II. LEARNING IS A GIFT

- HOOK: When beginning a new lesson, put an object that relates to your lesson in a box and wrap it in beautiful paper or for a quicker method, put the object in a brown paper bag.
- LINE; Relay several pieces of information about the item to the class. See if they can guess the purpose of the lesson or the item in the box/bag.
- SINKER: The person that guesses the item can unwrap it and tell how he/she figured it out from the information the teacher relayed. This works well in a science class with introducing a chemical element or in a math class with an introduction to the stock market or graphing.

III. TOP TEN LISTS

- HOOK: Divide students into small groups. Ask the group to create a Letterman Top Ten List about the current lesson plan. Example: The top ten reasons to learn about the civil war or the top ten reasons that recycling is important.
- LINE: As each group reads their list, note any duplicates. Come up with a master class list with the best top ten items.
- SINKER: In the assessment ask how many of the things they can remember from the top ten lists.

IV. ASSESSMENTS ARE A JOKE

- HOOK: Hold a lottery to determine which student will study which part of the upcoming unit or lesson.
- LINE: Each person will review their material by reading it to their parents or to a younger student or in groups in the classroom.
- SINKER: Ask the students to create a test question that is in a joke or riddle format and summarizes their reading assignment. So each student will contribute a “test” question that is in the form of a riddle or joke. Parents often get a kick out of helping with this. The entire test can be comprised of “joke” questions.

V. HUMOR STYLES

- **HOOK;** Create a Humor Haven in your classroom. This is an area that is filled with joke and riddle books as well as fun activities and creative activities. You can include toys, clown noses, dress-up clothes, etc. Please note that some of these may work better for younger age groups. Again-you know what will work with your students.
- **LINE:** Ask students to visit this area to research their humor style. What makes them laugh and helps them to learn? Invite them to discover how they learn best and how their humor style can help them learn. (Morrison, 2008)
- **SINKER:** Have students share jokes and riddles over the loud speaker in school. It is fun to create an all-school riddle contest for special occasions. Include jokes and riddles and funny stories in the school newspaper. Display student's riddles on the hallway bulletin boards.

So reel in some fun by putting the hook, line and sinker of humor in your tackle box!

Testing Can Be a Funny Thing

More than half our students admit to test anxiety. We know that reducing anxiety improves student performance, and while not every teacher can tell a joke, nearly every experienced teacher has a bag of fun tricks to improve learning. Reaching into that bag at assessment time, and adding humor to the mix, can send the dopamine levels up and the anxiety levels down.

If you have not already done so, think about redefining the testing/assessment process. Deliberately change the perspective of testing from a possible source of anxiety towards a joyful celebration of learning.

- Hold study sessions that intersperse joke time with study skills strategies.
- Incorporate game formats: invite students to write test questions in a "Trivial Pursuit" format, or Jeopardy, Charades, Wheel of Fortune, or Finish Line.
- Use jokes, puns, and riddles. One teacher has students create "riddle" test questions, then uses the "riddle" questions as a study guide, and includes the best riddles on the test.
- Turn test day into a "party day." Again, you know which of these ideas will work best with your students. Some of these ideas may be to:
 1. Create positive environment with posters, balloons and streamers.
 2. Play relaxing student-chosen music before tests
 3. Award prizes are to students who got at least 7 hours of sleep.

4. Include jokes before the test by students or the teacher.
5. Bring gum for students to munch on or healthy snacks before the testing process.

You can reduce anxiety and even make your tests something that students look forward to by infusing light-heartedness in the actual test, with a sprinkling of humor. Smile-inducers might include:

1. Who is your favorite teacher?
 - A. Mary Kay Morrison
 - B. Ms. Morrison
 - C. Both A and B
 - D. All of the Above
2. What would Scooby Doo?
3. Write a Letterman Top Ten List with additional things you learned from this unit for 10 extra credit points.

Do take the time to play and have fun. Believe!! Yes—believe in the benefits of humor. If you are full of energy, excitement and enthusiasm, your students will be more likely to participate, be less stressed and learn more. Take a few minutes to jot down some of your ideas and consider how you can include humor as a purposeful component of your lesson plans and your assessments. Remember to travel to In-Jest on a frequent basis. You can find more information on my Humor Quest page on Facebook. I frequently share information about humor resources on Linked In and Twitter. For additional information visit my web site at <http://www.questforhumor.com/> I would love to hear from you about your humor practice. Email me at marykay@questforhumor.com

References

- Berk, R. A. (2004). Coping with the daily stressors of an academic career: Try mirthium®. *Academic Physician and Scientist* July/August, 2–3.
- Henslin, Earl. (2008). *This is your brain on joy*. TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Morrison, M.K. (2008) *Using humor to maximize learning: the links between positive emotions and education*. Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, MD.
- Radcliffe, Jennifer. (2011) *Middle School Teachers Can Take Heart*. Houston Chronicle
- Sapolsky, R. J. (1998). *Why zebras don't get ulcers: An updated guide to stress, stress-related diseases, and coping*. New York: W. H. Freeman.
- Sapolsky, R. J. (1999). *Stress and your shrinking brain*. Discover, March, 116–22.