

Humor is human, teaching is human

Humor is teaching?

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*To be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition.*

--Dewey, 1910

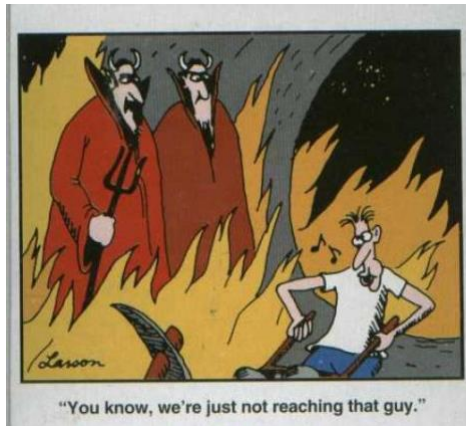
A valid question was thrown at me during my inquiry. Could you define humor? I gave it lots of thought, could humor simply be to make someone laugh using bathroom jokes? I wish it were that simple, but it seems it is not. That question launched me into a personal and academic inquiry. The most profound effect humor has made, and continues to make, in my life is the way it can make serious and even difficult situations not only bearable but amusing as well. My mother passed away 3 years ago. A good friend of hers came by recently to visit to see how I'd been doing. Before my mother's friend left she said, "you know you're mom is looking down at you, and she is so proud with what you've accomplished in your life." I felt compelled to leave on a lighter note and responded with "who says she's looking down?" As Vincent writes, a person with a well-developed sense of humor is much more likely to be able to cope successfully with adversity and I can attest to that. This personal anecdote shows only one aspect of humor's role in life but it does not provide a clear definition of the word. English poet Wendy Cope sums up my feelings on searching for the definition of humor, "If anyone needs me to define "funny" or "humorous", they have my sympathy" (Rogers, 1984).

Is humor a tangible one line definition or is it a frame of mind or perspective that we take into situations? There is no single theory on humor or even an agreed upon definition, which makes for a great (and frustrating) inquiry as there is no single answer. Harvey Mindness provides an analysis of what he calls "the humorous frame of mind."

Six characteristics are essential to this outlook or attitude and help to define humor beyond thinking something is funny and consequently laughing. The characteristics are: flexibility, spontaneity, unconventionality, shrewdness, playfulness and humility (Mindness, 1971). These characteristics are not only essential when defining humor but I argue they are essential qualities for teachers and students alike to possess. But why are these qualities important? As philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey believed, education is not preparation for life but rather, life itself (Rogers, 1984). Teachers and students must laugh, cry, and feel anger, joy, elation and disappointment because they are human. The expressions of these feelings belong just as much inside the classroom as they do outside. Developing a humorous outlook depends on teachers valuing humor as a way to make teaching and learning more fully human (Rogers, 1984). In the following I will focus on four of the six defining characteristics of humor; flexibility, spontaneity, playfulness and humility. Defining these characteristics will help to define humor and provide rationale for their inclusion inside the classroom.

#### Flexibility:

According to Mindness' humorous outlook, flexibility is the ability to see every side of every issue and every side of every side. You can take the most obvious phrase or situation and turn it over and over again in your mind, examining it from all perspectives (Rogers, 1984). Indeed, this is what comedians do.



This is such a rich characteristic for teacher and learner's alike to share. A goal of education is for student's to see beyond themselves, to see situations through a variety of lens' and the vehicle to achieving this is to adopt a flexible attitude. Decker described the humor conscious teacher as someone who intentionally invokes students' imaginations and sense of play to invite them into a spirited and lively investigation of the richness of the world. To be open to experience and see situations, issues, actions and comments with "fresh eyes" we, as teachers, are not solely privileging our students' intellectual abilities but rather respecting and acknowledging a broader range of human experiences and perspectives.

#### Spontaneity:

Spontaneity, according to Mindess, is the ability to leap from mode of thought to another, to see instant connections. This is what famous comedians such as Robin Williams and George Carlin do when they use props or audience comments; this is what improvisation comedy is based on. We want our students to see and seek connections rather than live in a categorized world. I hope our goal as educators is to avoid mass

producing students who think the same way, see situations in the same light and react similarly to every question, comment and object they interact with. Our world would be a very dull place if that were the case. Yet schools have the ability to break down our experience as an alive whole, into an endless array of categories, taxonomies, concepts, criteria and evaluative judgments (Glazer, 1999). By approaching the world in this fashion the result is with each year of schooling our spirit and the sense of aliveness and richness of the world deflate (Glazer, 1999). This should not be the case. Seeing connections between two unlikely things, bisociation, is what great ideas and inventions are made of, as well as great comics (Dewey, 1991). In the comic classroom the teacher intentionally puts things together that haven't previously had a meaningful relationship so that new relationships can be considered, old categories challenged and *the* right answer can be reconceived as *an* answer (Decker, 2007). By not always waiting for student's to come up with *the* answer we are not solely privileging intellectual aspects of being but respecting/acknowledging a broader range of human experience such as sudden shifts in thinking that our student's will experience.

|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  |                  |  |
|---------------|--|-----------------|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|--|-----------------|--|------------------|--|
| TOXIC FOODS   |  |                 |  |                                 | PERIODIC TABLE of FOODS |             |  |                 |  | Gassy Foods      |  |
| crabs         |  | MALIGNANT FOODS |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | baked beans      |  |
| oysters       |  | haggis          |  | NON-FOODS                       |                         |             |  |                 |  | beer + peanuts   |  |
|               |  |                 |  | QUESTIONABLE / TRANSITION FOODS |                         |             |  | mustard         |  | BBQ sauce        |  |
| shrimp        |  | brussel sprouts |  | hot dogs                        |                         | K.D.        |  | chicken noodles |  | cheez whiz       |  |
| farmed salmon |  | liver + onions  |  | rice-a-roni                     |                         | tater tots  |  | instant pudding |  | Marmite          |  |
| gin           |  | mushy peas      |  | pop tarts                       |                         | Froot loops |  | Eggo waffles    |  | chicken nuggets  |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | mayo             |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | corn relish      |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | lentil soup      |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | chip dip         |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | ham              |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | chili dog        |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | pimentos         |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | margarine        |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | pickled eggs     |  |
| NON-GMO FOODS |  |                 |  | seaweed                         |                         | truffles    |  | wild rice       |  | maple syrup      |  |
| NATURAL MEATS |  |                 |  | ants                            |                         | moose       |  | bear            |  | snails           |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | dandelion leaves |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | salmon berries   |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | grouse           |  |
|               |  |                 |  |                                 |                         |             |  |                 |  | grubs            |  |

The above exercise is an example of an activity that was designed to soften the edges of traditional categories to encourage students to make new connections (Decker, 2007). All categories have a purpose but they can be restructured to form new purposes. These types of exercises, Decker explains, help to avoid the debilitating state of mind she calls “hardening of the categories.” The more we invite students to play the more they trust their imaginations as a valuable source of information when beginning a new task. Students learn to explore new ideas with confidence. They become at ease with and maybe intrigued by learning something new. Isn’t this a major goal of teaching?

Playfulness:

Comus, the Greek god of fertility whose name is the root of comedy, busied himself with the maintenance of the commonplace conditions in life. His job was to maintain equilibrium among living things and restoring it once it was lost (Decker, 2007). I thought this to be the most appropriate root of a word, as this is what learners are doing every day. Our students know “stuff” when they enter our classroom; part of our job as teachers is to introduce new or different stuff to the learners and to move them and their knowledge into new situations (Decker, 2007). As teachers we couple their previous knowledge with an unfamiliar situation which expands their knowledge. We can also invite students to apply their previous or newly learned knowledge to a new task or unusual purpose. Throughout this process, we as teachers are introducing ambiguity. If we can embrace ambiguity with courage and a sense of play we can learn new things about old stuff and we can learn new stuff. We then take our new stuff and continue on to

another uncertain situation. This is learning. Like Comus, we alternate between imbalance and equilibrium (Decker, 2007). This process seems daunting but we do it formally every day in school and informally in life.

Rogers describes life as a game, a game that nobody wins but which does not have to be won to be enjoyed. Illness, tragedy, sadness, sorrow and death itself are necessary and inevitable parts of the game, as I experienced them all with my family, the only way to play the game without going mad is to recognize this, accept it, and, if possible laugh at it. Because, as Gelven argues, laughter is not a demonstration of our foolishness; by recognizing folly we demonstrate our rationality.

As previously discussed, the “humor conscious” teacher invites students into a spirited and lively investigation of the richness of the world. I love the word investigation, with investigation comes searching and questioning. As mentioned earlier we want to guide students to *an* answer not *the* answer. Rich learning comes with sustaining the student and their question until they have reached a place of understanding that satisfies his/her standards of inquiry (Decker, 2007). This is complex and requires responsiveness and attention from both the student and the teacher but those qualities are far more significant in the classroom and in life than is the search for a simple and even reductive answer. Comic pedagogy practices a way of being that is constantly open to the possibility of another way of being, becoming too certain too soon is a recipe for failure (Decker, 2007). Ways to expand one’s limited view, something student teachers, teachers, and student’s alike can greatly benefit from, is to look at the world through a comic lens; reading funny books, studying cartoons, practicing and attending comic

performances and spending time with young children (Decker, 2007). While looking at life through someone else's comic lens you are bound to discover the six characteristics that Mindess uses to describe humor.

#### Humility:

Dr. Elaine Decker speaks about laughter in a way that relates laughter to the humble teacher. Her definition of laughter makes me think about how teachers, especially new teachers can cope with the many challenges they will face in their first few years of teaching. I've heard countless times how the first five years of teaching are beyond difficult, that you are fighting to just keep your head above water. Laughter in the face of a great challenge might signal that we are giving up, yet it more likely means we are giving in; giving in to being mortal, giving in to being affected as much by circumstance as by agency, giving in to our responsibility to make the best possible judgment even knowing that it might not be the best possible judgment (Decker, 2007). Paulo Friere describes humility as one of the indispensable qualities of progressive teachers. Without humility one cannot listen with respect to those one judges to be below one's competence level (Friere, 1998). Teachers should listen, not in a condescending manner, to all that comes their way because it is their human duty (Friere, 1998).

Rogers describes humility as one of the essential characteristics of a humorous frame of mind, as well as probably the hardest to develop because we all take ourselves too seriously. Decker cautions teachers that becoming too certain too soon is a recipe for failure. How are students ever supposed to understand someone else's point of view, perspectives or personal experiences if they cannot accept and understand that we are all,



as Friere puts it, aware of something and all ignorant of something. We want our students to be OK with uncertainty and ambiguity and to have this attitude of “insecure security and uncertain certainty” when approaching a new task and learning (Friere, 1998).

Having a playful stance on learning is, in other words, to have a more humble expression of inquiry (Decker, 2007). An easy way to begin developing this quality as a teacher can simply be, to be prepared to laugh at yourself, to share your mistakes with your students and to help your students understand that you too are human. I caution that laughing at yourself is not the same as laughing at the expense of others. This is something teachers have to teach their students regardless if they take on a comic perspective or not. *Seinfeld* captured millions of viewers for almost a decade as it used life as comic material; relating to the audience by analyzing mundane daily events and human behavior through a comic lens. The show’s humor was so “human”, a quality that we should be incorporating in the classroom.

This inquiry has made me wonder if the characteristics of humor should have a place in our teacher education program, and not only in the classroom of our future students. How could a teacher education program incorporate these characteristics of humor? And why should it do so? Why should we take a comic view of something as difficult and consequential as becoming a teacher? Decker argues that we teachers should develop our comic spirits precisely *because* teaching, like being, is difficult, contextual and grounded in judgment. My next, more concrete, question surrounding this inquiry is “how is this done, in a practical sense?” I have one example where I observed a task being undertaken by 30 students who seemed to possess an already well developed comic lens.

My practicum teacher invoked imagination and the student's sense of play when she assigned a fairly open-ended social studies project on government with some set parameters. After studying a dry chapter in their social studies textbook on governments across the world, the students were to create their own country (see Appendix A). Initially I thought this would be painful for the students, as the textbook lacked in student engagement. The students started off quiet, while they thought their options through. In no time table groups were engaging in very interesting dialogue and fulfilling (and exceeding) all requirements of the assignment.

One student decided to create a country run by vegetables and she declared war on the junk food country, created by her neighbour. Another country would be run by babies. The student justified this by saying all babies are innocent and kind and they would export baby oil and of course their president would be the baby genius. Another country was founded upon Greek Mythology incorporating different values from multiple myths and the government would be made up of different gods and goddesses depending on his/her powers. Students discussed the pros of cons of their newly created countries and had to defend and justify their decisions to their classmates. Not only did everyone satisfy the requirements of the assignment but the class had created a new world. This world had alliances and enemies between countries based on a country's economy and moral values, is this not what the world looks like today?

This assignment, in my eyes, was successful because the task itself, the students working on it and the teacher who created it, embodied the characteristics and qualities that define humor; playfulness, spontaneity, flexibility and humility. Students were not simply taking notes to prepare for life; rather they were experiencing it in the classroom.

The characteristics of humour present in this activity made it more “fully human” by not privileging intellectual aspects of being but respecting/acknowledging a broader range of human experiences. As the students experienced different emotions, incongruities, sudden shifts in thinking and varying perspectives when undertaking the task.

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