

Laughing With Children

Humor belongs in the classroom—for what it teaches us and for its own sake.

VINCENT R. ROGERS

Arlene Rosenberg



Uproarious laughter coming from a middle school classroom stopped me as I walked down the hall, and made me cavedrop for a moment outside the door. The teacher was finishing a story about the time his 3rd grade teacher angrily told him to stop jumping on his math book. He had put a badly crumpled composition between the book's pages, it turned out, and was jumping on it to press out the wrinkles. The teacher was animated, fully in touch with his students, and the children beamed as he told this story. There were, as they say, "good vibes."

Laughter is far too rare in today's classrooms. Our obsession with effectiveness and efficiency, time-on-task, standards, discipline, skills, objectives, inputs, outputs, test scores, fear, and failure have turned schools into rather grim places.

Humor and Health

We are, of course, living in a serious time. Some would argue that there is little to laugh about, either in or out of school. But it is at times like these when laughter may indeed be the healthiest antidote.

Take, for example, the experience Norman Cousins describes in *Anatomy of an Illness*. Cousins was diagnosed as

suffering from a serious "collagen" disease. The connective tissue in his spine was disintegrating, and his doctors offered little hope of recovery. Cousins had other ideas, however, and began his own program of laughter therapy.

He had a movie projector set up in his hospital room to show classics from the TV show "Candid Camera" and old Marx Brothers movies. The nurse pulled down the blinds and turned on the machine:

It worked. I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep. When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, we would switch on the motion-picture projector again, and, not infrequently, it would lead to another pain-free sleep interval. Sometimes, the nurse read to me out of a trove of humor books. Especially useful were E. B. and Katharine White's *Subtreasury of American Humor* and Max Eastman's *The Enjoyment of Laughter*.

If laughter did in fact have a salutary effect on the body's chemistry, it seemed at least theoretically likely that it would enhance the system's ability to fight the inflammation. So we took sedimentation rate readings just before as well as several hours after the laughter episodes. Each time, there was a

Vincent R. Rogers is Professor of Education, University of Connecticut, Storrs.

drop of at least five points. The drop by itself was not substantial, but it held and was cumulative. I was greatly elated by the discovery that there is a physiologic basis for the ancient theory that laughter is good medicine.¹

Cousins improved dramatically and at this writing is leading a relatively normal life.

Now, no one suggests (least of all Norman Cousins) that all diseases can be cured by viewing Marx Brothers

movies; that there is no such thing as terminal illness; or that medical professionals are all incompetent fools. What Cousins' experience does suggest, however, is that the body can better mobilize itself to fight disease if one's mind set is positive and hopeful, rather than negative and despairing.

We've known for a long time that fear, depression, and stress all have serious physical effects on the human body. They release chemicals that restrict

blood flow. Many people suffering heart attacks die before they reach the hospital, not because of the heart attack itself, but because of the panic accompanying it.

The brain is one of the most active and prolific glands in the human body. Scientists have identified more than 2,000 substances that the brain secretes (and more are discovered each year). The mind has some control over these secretions; it can produce biochemical changes in the human body. Thus Cousins correctly saw joyfulness, playfulness, and laughter as conditions likely to bring about positive physical changes in the body.

Psychiatrists define the well-adjusted, emotionally healthy individual as one who has the capacity to laugh, to put things into perspective, to separate genuine tragedy from mere annoyance. The sick person lacks this ability. (John Hinckley, the President's would-be assassin, was said never to have laughed after reaching the age of 21!)

The strong, healthy personality with a well-developed sense of humor is much more likely to be able to cope successfully with adversity. Survivors of Nazi concentration camps attest to this, as do the Korean prisoners of war, the Iranian hostages, and others who found themselves in similar circumstances.

In addition, humor serves as a powerful physical and social relaxant. Most of us have shared the experience of attempting to lift a heavy piece of furniture with two or three friends helping. Someone says something funny, we all begin to laugh, and we must put the furniture down. Our muscles have relaxed and can no longer handle a task that calls for muscle tension.

Public speakers often begin their talks with humorous stories. The best group leaders know how to use humor to ease tension, to make participants feel comfortable and relaxed.

Finally, I would argue that humor is valuable simply because, like Goya's paintings, Martha Graham's dancing, and Stevie Wonder's singing, it gives us *pleasure*. Humor is an art form as I see it, and our humorists—the hundreds of standup comics, filmmakers, playwrights, cartoonists, mimes, columnists, poets, and novelists who create in order to make us laugh—should be (but often aren't) among the most revered artists in our society. The sheer joy of



laughter is as valuable for its own sake as is the inspired painting. It ought to be more and more, rather than less and less, a part of our daily lives, both in and out of schools.

The Humorous Frame of Mind

To nurture in schools (or anywhere else, for that matter), it is necessary to stand off a little and examine the phenomenon itself to understand it better. Psychologist Harvey Mindess wrote a brilliant analysis of what he calls the "humorous outlook" or "humorous frame of mind." He identifies six characteristics that seem to be essential to this outlook or attitude: flexibility, spontaneity, unconventionality, shrewdness, playfulness, and humility.

To Mindess, *flexibility* is a willingness to examine, to see "every side of every issue and every side of every side."² It is to see things with fresh eyes, to be, as Carl Rogers would say, "open to experience."

I immediately think of the work of George Carlin, who seems obsessed with the notion of taking absolutely nothing for granted, of looking deep beneath the surface of the ordinary and commonplace. Thus he creates comic routines like these:

Have you ever noticed that you can't read the numbers on the top of a light bulb when the bulb is turned on? So, you turn it off—but then there's not enough light to read the numbers.

Have you ever been to an airport and heard the public address announcer say, "United Flight 215, non-stop to Chicago, is now ready for boarding"? Man, I'm not getting on anything that's non-stop. I want to go up and come down.³

Carlin turns the tiniest pebble, the most obvious phrase or situation, over and over in his mind, examining it from every perspective. This, of course, is the way most comics, and indeed most artists, work.

Spontaneity, Mindess' second characteristic, is an "ability to leap from one mode of thought to another, to see instant connections."⁴ It is developing to a high art the "free association" technique used so often by psychologists. Every idea, every object, every moment, every comment suggests a lengthy string of loosely related ideas. Comic Jonathan Winters, calling for ideas from the audience or working with props he has never seen before, creates incredibly funny routines. Robin Williams and George Carlin are also masters of this

approach. Here is an excerpt from one of Carlin's classic recordings:

Imagine that a group of Madison Avenue advertising people decided to launch a selling campaign for birth control pills—you know, something like they do with sleeping pills—"Nodoze," "Sleepase," etc. What are some really catchy names that they might use? How about . . . "Inconceivable," "Pregnot," "Mom-Bomb," or "Junior Miss."⁵

The third characteristic, *unconventionality*, is "freedom from the conventional values of a particular time, place, or culture." Lenny Bruce was arrested for performing his routine naked at a club in New York. For years he had worked in sleazy strip joints where naked women were the main attraction. Bruce wanted to challenge that notion, to poke fun at it, to satirize it. But the world in the 1950s wasn't ready for that much unconventionality.

Mindess' fourth characteristic, *shrewdness*, is "the refusal to believe that anyone is what one appears to be"; that everyone has feet of clay.⁶ He is really talking about the attitude expressed so clearly in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, and comics from Chaplin to Carson have illuminated the times they live in by ridiculing those in high places. Perhaps no work of comic art has ever been more effective than Chaplin's devastating attack on Hitler and Mussolini in the classic film, *The Great Dictator*.

The fifth quality is *playfulness*: "one's grasp of life as a game—a tragicomic game that nobody wins but which does not have to be won to be enjoyed."⁷ Thus illness, tragedy, crudity, dishonesty, infidelity, sadness, sorrow, and death itself are necessary, inevitable parts of the game; and the only way to play the game and not go mad is to recognize this, accept it, and, if possible, laugh at it.

Woody Allen continuously exploits these themes in his work. For example, he tells of winning a scholarship to an interracial, interfaith children's summer camp, "where I was sadistically beaten by children of every race, color, and religion."⁸

Mindess' last characteristic is *humility*, "the ability to shrug off the insufficiency of one's ultimate wisdom, the probable meaninglessness of one's profoundest thoughts."⁹ This attitude is perhaps the most difficult of all to develop since most of us take ourselves too seriously—academics perhaps more than others. The novelist Kingsley Amis illustrates it in his classic, *Lucky Jim*.

Jim Dixon, a reluctant history teacher at a minor British university, is trying desperately to publish rather than perish. In a moment of marvelous comic insight, he recognizes his "scholarly paper" for what it really is:

It was a perfect title ("The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485") in that it crystallized the article's niggling mindlessness, its funeral parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems. Dixon had read, or begun to read, dozens like it, but his own seemed worse than most in its air of being convinced of its own usefulness and significance. "In considering this strangely neglected topic," it began. This what neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what? His thinking all this without having defiled and set fire to the typescript only made him appear to himself as more of a hypocrite and fool.¹⁰

Nurturing Humor in Schools

So—we nurture a sense of humor by encouraging ourselves and our students to become more flexible, more spontaneous, more unconventional, shrewder, more playful, and more humble. In the process, we contribute to the development of healthier, happier human beings.

But in a practical, more specific sense, how is this done? To be honest, I'm not really sure. I'm certain it *can't* be done by the development of a K-12, sequentially organized humor curriculum.

Perhaps we can begin by recognizing that schools are places where *human beings* live, work, and play. As John Dewey was fond of saying, education is not preparation for life but rather, life itself. So the people in schools—children and adults—must laugh, cry, feel anger, joy, elation, and disappointment simply because they are human. The expression of these feelings belongs in schools as much as it does in life outside of school.

Thus, it is all right to laugh in school. All of us make mistakes occasionally; all of us do silly things, become hopelessly confused, misuse words, give outrageously wrong answers, forget to zip up zippers, call Wednesday Thursday. Developing a humorous outlook depends on teachers recognizing this condition, accepting it, and *valuing* it as a way to make teaching and learning more fully human.

Good teachers, then, are prepared to laugh at *themselves*, to share their own mistakes, to help children understand that teachers, too, are human. Good teachers also encourage their students to

laugh at themselves, to relieve tension by allowing themselves to see the occasional absurdities, inconsistencies, and sometimes just plain foolishness in their day-to-day behavior.

Good teachers also have the courage to teach children not to laugh at the mistakes and misfortunes of others. The child who cruelly mimics the speech of a stutterer needs to be told how much this can hurt. Ethnic jokes told by Italians about Italians may be okay (they're laughing at themselves), but ethnic jokes told by one group about another are not. Unfortunately, there's no lesson plan, curriculum guide, or workbook that can help a teacher deal with this kind of "humor." It must be confronted directly and honestly through intelligent, informed discussion.

In addition, good teachers whose "humor consciousness" has been raised will find ways to show films by comic artists on days other than those immediately preceding school vacation. They recognize that these films are comic masterpieces and deserve the same kind of discussion and analysis we give to a Robert Frost poem or a story by Edgar Allan Poe.

Such teachers also display pictures and posters of comic artists, ask students to keep humor diaries or journals, make lists of favorite jokes, comedians, films, and television comedies, do humor surveys (What is the funniest joke you can remember? Why is it funny? When was the last time you made someone laugh? Was it intentional? What makes five-year-olds laugh?), tape and discuss excerpts from comedy recordings, observe "what makes people laugh" in a variety of social settings, bring in baby pictures and other old family photographs for caption writing.

The humor-conscious teacher uses resource materials that offer rich opportunities for the development of flexibility, spontaneity, unconventionality, playfulness, shrewdness, and humility, the characteristics essential to the humorous outlook or frame of mind.

Humor Resources

I've included the following material in what I consider a basic resource collection for elementary and secondary school teachers. I have *not* included lengthy suggestions for the material's use; I leave that to the teacher's imagination. The collection is a "humor sampler" that should suggest additional materials of all kinds that teachers might add to their personal collection.

• Make good use of comedy classics for children; Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, for example. Consider the following Silverstein poem:¹¹

Rudy Felsh

Rudy Felsh

Knows how to belch
Better than anyone ever did.
Margo says that Rudy Felsh
Is a nasty vulgar kid.
Sometimes he will go to hell
Or jail or Canada, but now
Every night I pray that first
Rudy Felsh will show me how.

Silverstein is adored by kids because he dares to say in his poems what adults (including many teachers) think ought not to be talked about in public places. He is "unconventional," as are Dr. Seuss, Maurice Sendak, Judy Blume, and numbers of others.

• Keep your eyes open for "adult" material that can be used with older children—for example, Mark Twain's essay, "At The Funeral";¹²

Do not criticize the person in whose honor the entertainment is given. Make no remarks about his equipment. If the handles are plated, it is best to seem to not observe it.

If the odor of the flowers is too oppressive for your comfort, remember that they were not brought there for you, and that the person for whom they were brought suffers no inconvenience from their presence.

Listen, with as intense an expression of attention as you can command, to the official statement of the character and history of the person in whose honor the entertainment is given; and if these statistics should seem to fail to tally with the facts, in places, do not nudge your neighbor, or press your foot upon his toes, or manifest, by any other sign, your awareness that taffy is being distributed.

If the official hopes expressed concerning the person in whose honor the entertainment is given are known by you to be oversized, let it pass—do not interrupt.

At the moving passages, be moved—but only according to the degree of your intimacy with the parties giving the entertainment, or with the party in whose honor the entertainment is given. When a blood relation sobs, an intimate friend should choke up, a distant acquaintance should sigh, a stranger should merely fumble sympathetically with his handkerchief. Where the occasion is military, the emotions should be graded according to military rank, the highest officer present taking precedence in emotional violence, and the rest modifying their feelings according to their position in the service.

Do not bring your dog.

Follow-up assignments might include "In the Cafeteria" or "At the Junior Prom."

• Make generous use of cartoons from any available source—although old *New Yorker* magazines are probably the richest.

Provide kids with lists of sample captions to either match with random col-

lections of pictures gathered from magazines and newspapers or create their own cartoons to go with the captions. Sample captions might include: "Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking. . . . 'Sorry, Mr. Taber is all tied up.' 'Going my way, bud?' 'It's the eternal triangle.' 'John's a good catch.' 'Of all things to stuff down my throat!'"

Try building on Lewis Carroll's "The Mad Gardener's Song." It makes no particular sense, but one idea suggests another, and so the poem develops.¹³

He thought he saw an Elephant
That practiced on a fife.
He looked again, and found it was
A letter from his wife.
"At length I realize," he said,
"The bitterness of Life!"

He thought he saw a Buffalo
Upon the chimney-piece.
He looked again, and found it was
His Sister's Husband's Niece.
"Unless you leave this house," he said,
"I'll send for the Police!"

He thought he saw a Rattlesnake
That questioned him in Greek.
He looked again, and found it was
The Middle of Next Week.
"The one thing I regret," he said,
"Is that it cannot speak!"

For an even more outlandish activity, try to create sequels to Carroll's well-known "Jabberwocky": "Twas brillig, and the slithy toves. . . ."

• Tests are a part of schooling for all children. Walter Sellar and Robert Yeatman's classic *1066 and All That* includes test questions that are tongue-in-cheek and quite unconventional. For example:

What convinces you that Henry VIII had VIII wives? Was it worth it?

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a Throne."

- (a) Suggest remedies, or
(b) Imitate the action of a Tiger

Estimate the average age of
(a) The Ancient Britons
(b) Ealdormen
(c) Old King Cole

Describe in excessive detail
(a) The advantages of the Black Death
(b) The fate of the Duke of Clarence
(c) A Surfeit

N. B.—Candidates should write on at least one side of the paper.¹⁴

Ask your students to create some unusual test questions based on any aspect of your curriculum.

• Begin personal or class collections of puns: "All the animals came to the picnic in pairs except the worms. They came in apples."

Silly Spoonerisms: I keep my icicles well-boiled.



The LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSE is nearly extinct, but its legacy is alive and well..... Attention to educational quality and comprehensiveness is still required.....

"AUDITS FOR EXCELLENCE"

RESPONDING TO CURRENT CONCERNS
OF PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Immediately sensitive to local issues..... your District's chosen focus addressed by a powerful, highly professional and appropriately constituted team of educational and management specialists.

CALL OR WRITE FOR DESCRIPTIVE BROCHURE

BARNHILL-HAYES, INC.

788 N. Jefferson Street, Suite #202
Milwaukee, WI 53202

414/276-4554

The CLM project in the Shoreham-Wading River School District has gained national recognition through conferences, professional journals, and visitations by educators from across the country. The project is now being shared through another channel:



The Institute of Cognitive Levels Matching

The goal of **The Institute of Cognitive Levels Matching** is to provide an environment that encourages thinking through the study and application of cognitive developmental principles in schools, using a Piagetian framework.

The Institute will be held on the Southampton College campus of Long Island University, Southampton, N.Y.

The Institute will begin on the afternoon of Sunday, August 12th, and will run through the morning of Saturday, August 18th.

For more information please contact:

Dr. Martin Brooks

The Institute of Cognitive Levels Matching
c/o Shoreham-Wading River Central School District
Shoreham, N.Y. 11786 (516) 929-8500

Daffynitions: Aftermath: That which follows arithmetic.

Tom Swifties: "You say you've struck oil?" she gushed.

• Ask older students to make additional entries for Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*:

absurdity, n. A statement or belief inconsistent with one's own opinion.

admiration, n. Our polite recognition of another's resemblance to ourselves.

apologize, v.i. To lay the foundation for a future offense.

bore, n. A person who talks when you wish him to listen.

congratulation, n. The civility of envy.

When my son, Evan, was in the second grade, his teacher read the class the story of Columbus' voyage to the New World. She asked them to imagine they were members of Columbus' crew and to write a story about the experience. Evan wrote, in part:

I was one of the crew. The name of my ship was the Santa Maria. It was rough and I was sick. Columbus said, "Sail on, sail on, sail on." I was so sick. Columbus said, "Sail on, sail on, sail on." I said, "Shut up, Columbus!"

A shrewd observation, I think; I hope his teacher laughed. □

¹Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1979), pp. 39-40.

²Harvey Mindess, "The Sense in Humor," *Saturday Review*, August 21, 1971, p. 10.

³From a George Carlin appearance on "The Tonight Show."

⁴Mindess, p. 10.

⁵George Carlin—FM and AM, recorded by Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1972.

⁶Mindess, p. 10.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Woody Allen—*Stand Up Comic*, recorded by Casablanca Records, 1978.

⁹Mindess, p. 10.

¹⁰Excerpt from *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis. Copyright 1953 by Kingsley Amis. Reprinted by permission of Doubleday & Company, Inc.

¹¹From *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein. Copyright 1974 by Shel Silverstein. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.

¹²Quoted in Joseph Littell, *The Comic Spirit* (Evanston, Ill.: McDougal, Littell Co., 1974), p. 41.

¹³Quoted in Joseph Littell, *The Comic Spirit*, p. 2.

¹⁴From *1066 and All That* by Walter Sellar and Robert Yeatman. Copyright 1931 by E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc. Copyright renewed 1959 by Robert Julian Yeatman. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, E.P. Dutton, Inc.

Copyright © 1984 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.