Teaching is No Laughing Matter. Or is it?
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It is no secret that one of the biggest issues teachers everywhere deal with is getting students’ attention. And if teachers are not getting, and keeping students’ attention, then students are not learning. So how does one captivate a disinterested audience? Humor. At least this is one tactic suggested by numerous educators to encourage students to be more attentive in class. But does it really work?

What is Humor in the Classroom?
The teaching practice of humor is when a teacher chooses to take a more comical and light-hearted approach to teaching as a tool to educate students. By using humor, educators hope to relax, relate, and connect with students; therefore, making the process of learning fun and easy. Humor can be used in a number of different ways while teaching. There are many common humor practices used by teachers, among them are: funny stories, funny comments, jokes, puns, cartoons, pictures, movie clips and silly outfits or costumes (Hellman, 2007, p. 37). These tools not only engage students, but also help them make life long connections. Humor can be used connect unknown material to something relatable.

What are the Benefits?
Besides making learning more enjoyable, humor has many benefits that are not quite as obvious. First there are psychological effects produced as a result of this practice. “…humor and laughter have been shown to reduce anxiety, decrease stress, enhance self-esteem, and increase self-motivation” (Garner, 2006, p.177). Under these conditions there is a very great possibility for learning. The more relaxed and confident a student is, the more likely they will be willing to engage and participate in not only learning, but also interacting in class.

Another unseen effect is what happens physiologically. “Humor and laughter can aid in learning through improved respiration and circulation, lower pulse and blood pressure, exercise of the chest muscles, greater organization of blood and the release of endorphins into the bloodstream” (Garner, 2006, p. 177). It is no little known fact that the healthier you are, the better you feel, and the better you feel, the more willing you are to learn or at least pay attention.

Aside from the psychological and physiological benefits, humor has been shown to help out in other ways, such as in future careers. In the article, “Using Humor in the Classroom,” Girdlefanny quotes an administrator for marketing and career development of the Van Buren Intermediate school district in Lawrence, Michigan named Marilyn Mitchell who says, “Recent studies show that a sense of humor is the most consistent characteristic among executives promoted in major companies, and that managers showing a sense of humor advance faster than those without one” (2004, pg.23) Therefore, it is not off base to suggest that showing students how approaching tough situations with a light-hearted attitude can not only help them now, but also in their future careers. In addition to helping with a child’s future, humor has a huge impact on their present situation. A classroom which has a humorous environment has actually been shown to have better attendance records (Garner, 2006, p.178). Having a fun, yet
educational learning environment is a sure way to make students want to come to class. If classroom attendance increases there is a very good chance that learning is increasing as well.

Making strong connections to information is a known benefit of using humor in the classroom, but there is another connection that is being made of equal importance, and that is the student/teacher connection. If a teacher is able to laugh at themselves and make a student feel more comfortable, the student will be more willing to take risks and ask questions in class. The relaxed environment created by a humorous teacher breaks down the barriers and allows students to be less afraid of getting an answer wrong and more willing to speak up (Girdlefanny, 2004, p.23).

**Why Humor?**

First of all, humor is just plain fun. Who doesn’t like laughing, enjoying themselves and having a good time? But above the simple fact of enjoyment, humor allows students to make strong connections. If something is funny we are more likely to remember it, or even possibly repeat it. If a person lists off a number of statistics, facts and figures, the audience will most likely not care, or worse, not remember. If the same information is shared in a fun or humorous way, the learner is not only enjoying themselves, but also unintentionally gaining the information being presented to them.

**Disadvantages**

Although humor is a great tool to use while teaching, there are some downsides to this practice. First of all keeping a student-teacher relationship is very important. Becoming more of a friend in students’ eyes is very easy when you act more like a comedian than an authority figure. Because of this, it is very easy to lose respect of students in the classroom if one is cracking jokes all of the time. Above this a teacher must ALWAYS make sure to be politically correct as well as age and audience appropriate. As Hellman says in his article, *Humor in the Classroom: Stu’s Seven Simple Steps to Success*, “One needs to be sensitive to diversity, and if possible embrace that diversity. Any attempt of humor that marginalizes a group should be avoided” (2007, p.38). A teacher must always be aware who they are speaking to and be careful not to cross any lines. Making jokes at a student’s expense is usually not appropriate and should be avoided in most situations.

Overall, creating a classroom environment that is informative, yet fun, generates the opportunity to engage students while equipping them with the proper tools for learning. As a teacher, providing a bit of comedic relief in the classroom may just be what it takes for a student to land that big corporate job somewhere down the road or maybe even just pass their next math exam. Finding the right moments to put a classroom full of anxious students at ease with a bit of laughter can be not only good for their health, but yours as a teacher too! So, whether it be holding students’ attention, helping make connections or just simply making kids want to show up for class, this teaching practice is sure to be a helpful tool. So go ahead, make them laugh!

**References**

