

# EDUCATION IS NOT A LAUGHING MATTER!

## Or is it?

By Stephen R. Sroka

SINGER-SONGWRITER JIMMY BUFFET said it well in his song, *Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes*. "If we couldn't laugh, we would all go insane." Could he have written this song for middle school teachers?

Many of us know that humor grabs attention, fosters creativity, and makes learning fun. But knowing how and when to use humor in the classroom is just as important. Humor is not appropriate when it makes fun of a person's race, color, creed, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, or disability. Good humor does not include crude language; off-color words have no place in the classroom. Humor should never hurt.

With those caveats in mind, consider these ideas for tapping your students' funny bones:

### Set up a Cartoon Corner —

Encourage students to bring subject-related humor into the classroom. At the end of the week, ask the class to pick the best cartoon

and discuss why the humor was so effective. One of my favorite cartoons comes from Gary Larson's *Far Side* series. It shows a family staring at a blank wall with the caption: "In the days before television."



### Talk About What Makes People Laugh —

Discuss the common threads of humor throughout history. Point out the good and bad ways that people have used humor around the world. Help them become comfortable sharing amusing events in their own lives. Be Punny! Students love puns and word plays. One of my students told me: "Most of your jokes are two-thirds of a pun — P. U."



**Think Humorously** — You can find something amusing in every classroom every day. Conversations often offer opportunities to spin off ideas about news events, cartoons, puns, and word plays. One day, after I told a class my age, a student responded that I was getting old. "I am not getting older," I declared with mock indignation, "I am becoming chronologically gifted!" Become aware of the humor that surrounds you every day. Collect humorous stories from newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. Share them with your students to introduce lessons and to reduce fatigue, stress, or uneasiness.



**Start a "Picture Packet"** — Every time you see a humorous picture, save it. Use pictures or overhead transparencies to make memorable points during discussions. Animals with anthropomorphic expressions are especially effective.

**Role-Play Revelry** — Ask students to act out humorous lessons, using props and scenery to make a playful impact. This is a great strategy for teaching life skills such as assertiveness, empathy, and conflict resolution.

**Test Students' Humor** — On humorous question, riddle, or can reduce stress levels. than hearing chuckles and around the classroom. Example: Name another place you would rather be right now: at lunch\_\_ at home sleeping\_\_ shopping at the mall\_\_ none of those places; I'm happy to be at school taking this test\_\_!



every test you create, include a cartoon. It's amazing how this There's nothing more relaxing guffaws erupt spontaneously

**Here's Looking at You, Teacher!** — Suggest that groups of students teach different lessons to the class by presenting a parody of you as an instructor. This technique helps you demonstrate how good humor involves laughing with, not at, someone. It also can give you some wonderful insights about how your students perceive you as a teacher and what they retain from your instruction.

**Smile** — It sounds simple, but it's amazing how often teachers forget to smile at students. Sometimes this is all a student needs to feel more relaxed, confident, and ready to learn. Recently, a student I taught 20 years ago told me that I was his favorite instructor. "Why?" I asked. "Because every day you would smile at me and say, 'Hi,'" he said.



**What You See is Not What you Get** — Poke fun at popular television programs, movies, or advertised products in magazines and newspapers. For example, when I was teaching health, I

wanted to make sure my students knew about the dangers of using tobacco. But Madison Avenue has created a powerful mystique for cigarettes, and millions of teenagers adopt the habit because they think smoking will make them cool. Ask students to examine cigarette advertisements to see if they can find references to the U.S. Surgeon General's health warnings. Suggest that they create their own ads using a humorous spin. I saw a wonderful example of this on a California billboard. In a parody of the Marlboro man ads, it featured two smoking cowboys and the caption, "Bob, I miss my lung!"

**Bumper Sticker Bonanza** — It has been said that you can find some of

society's greatest wisdom on bumper stickers. Examples: "If you can read this, thank a teacher." "Just Say Know." "As long as there are tests in schools, there will be prayer in schools." "Math Counts." Ask your students to create humorous subject-related bumper stickers.

Another caveat: Be gentle. Humor is powerful, and it can break down barriers to learning, but it also can erect barriers if you don't use it correctly. When in doubt, don't use it. Humor at someone else's expense is not funny. It is sad and nothing to laugh about. Remember, if you don't teach students that you care, they won't care about what you teach.

Lastly, I confess that using humor in the classroom is like many

lesson plans — some days anything works and other days, nothing works. But when humor does connect, it leaves life-long memories.

I recently retired after 30 years of teaching, including many years at the middle level. When some of my former students gathered to honor me, I asked them what they remembered from the good old days? Was it the time I jumped on my desk and took off my shoes to teach them about the bones in our feet? Was it the time I put an old mattress decorated with my silhouette against the wall so students could punch out their aggressions as they entered my classroom? Or was it the time I "wrestled" the principal to encourage students to attend after-school sporting events? One student piped up and said, "No. It was your caring and sense of humor. In fact, we forgot everything you said, and most of the things we did, but we never forgot the way you made us feel."

Now seriously, isn't that fun? ■

*Stephen Sroka, Ph.D., is an adjunct assistant professor at the Center for Adolescent Health at the Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, an adjunct associate professor of health education at Cleveland State University, and president of Health Education Consultants in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1994 he was named the nation's outstanding health teacher by the Disney American Teacher Awards, and in 1996 he was inducted into the National Teachers Hall of Fame. TEL: 216-521-1766. e-mail: drssroka@aol.com.*