

# Laughter makes you smarter

## Research continues to prove that laughter leads to learning

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"Laughing contributes to good mind and body balance," says Michael Lovorn, a humor researcher and education teacher from CSU Long Beach. "It makes students ready to learn and helps teachers rise above the assembly-line mentality. In an age of so-called failing schools, we should keep in mind that human beings have laughed longer than they've been tested, and that everybody appreciates being in an environment that is welcoming and conducive to putting smiles on their faces."

Although most adults remember at least one or two teachers from their school days whom they considered funny or entertaining, the structured or intentional use of humor in the classroom is a relatively new concept in the field of education. The reason may be what Lovorn describes as the "humor paradox": While society claims to place a high value on humor, there is often apprehension of employing humor in school or the workplace for fear of coming across as unproductive.

With so many benefits from using humor in the classroom, teachers shouldn't hold back, says Lovorn, a California Faculty Association member who realized the importance of humor when he was a brand-new history teacher put in front of 43 eighth-graders in the corner of a cafeteria while lunch was being served.

"I had only 35 books and no maps. I thought I had made the mistake of the ages by becoming a teacher. All I had at that point was my humor, and I learned to make it readily available."

Humor can be used as a means to increase student involvement and attention, help students retain information and even make difficult subjects downright enjoyable. And humor can relieve tension before an exam and actually help students perform better. Appropriate humor tends to complement curriculum rather than distract from it.

Of course, a teacher's job is to educate, not to entertain — but when humor makes the process more enjoyable, everybody benefits. And that includes teachers, who find that using humor in the classroom leaves them feeling invigorated instead of burned out — and also improves student behavior. For inspiration, the following funny CTA members — dare we say class clowns — share their shticks and secrets on how to use humor effectively in the classroom.

MARK RITTER

Astronomy and chemistry teacher at Temecula Valley High School and Temecula Valley

Educators Association member.

## HIS SHTICK

Lecturing in foreign accents. Standing on chairs on top of tables and jumping to show how energy levels increase and decrease in atoms via electrons. Dramatization of chemical reactions, such as what constitutes a solid, a liquid and a gas. "For a solid I stand there like a moron. As a liquid I start to loosen up. As a gas I run around the classroom and run into walls. In the old days, I'd injure myself weekly."

## BEST LINE

"I'm in an article about humor? There are other funny teachers, too? I'm really not the only one? I'd like to thank the academy..."

## BEST QUOTE FROM STUDENT

"My science teacher is insane," says student Gabbi Pleasant. "But he makes it fun and interesting."

## HUMOR ADVICE

"Use humor to make a point or teach a concept. Keep in mind that this is a serious class and students have to pass it. Flavor your class with humor; don't make your class a comedy routine." >>>

## ILIAN GUZMAN

Kindergarten teacher at Walker Elementary School and Santa Ana Educators Association member.

## HER SHTICK

Using puppets to teach math and language. Doing "roly-polies" (rolling around on the carpet) to relax. Creating "inside jokes" in each class based on everyday occurrences.

## REASON FOR USING HUMOR

"Without humor there is no survival. They will take over. They will look at each other and laugh and create their own humor, unless you are a better comedian than they are."

## HUMOR ADVICE

"Teach them — or retrain them — about the length of laughter that is appropriate, because they watch TV programs with prerecorded laughter that goes on for long periods. Send a message through a cue that after laughing, it's time to regroup."

## YVETTA FRANKLIN

Second-grade teacher at Tyrell Elementary School and Hayward Education Association member.

### HER SHTICK

During roll call, having students reply with their favorite food instead of their name, such as “tuna” or “hot dog” or “chocolate.” Singing funny songs — often accompanied by piano or dancing — such as “On the Road Again” when it’s time for recess; “Mama Said There’ll Be Days Like This” when struggling with difficult concepts; or “That’s the Way I Like It” when students earn good grades. Acting out vocabulary words — such as “transfixed” — by standing frozen, with a look of amazement on her face.

### REASON FOR USING HUMOR

“I do not have a lot of behavior problems. That doesn’t mean they are all perfect, of course. It keeps me energized. I’m the Energizer Bunny.”

### HUMOR ADVICE

“Don’t listen to your colleagues who say all the fun is gone from teaching. Refuse to believe it.”

### GARY ARZAMENDI

Fifth-grade teacher at Joe Stefani Elementary School and Merced City Teachers Association member.

### HIS SHTICK

Dramatizations of how not to act, such as how students may be “glum” on a Monday, offering up a tragic “good morning” and then asking, “What’s so good about it?” Or re-enacting how some students may “pretend” to be reading when they are actually daydreaming.

### BEST LINE TO STUDENTS

“Don’t say, ‘I don’t know’ when I ask you a question. Say ‘I don’t know yet.’ Because I’ve been working so hard to teach you this [pretends to cry], and if you say you don’t know, I will feel sooo bad.”

### REASON FOR USING HUMOR

“It keeps teaching fresh. And I’m having a great time, along with the kids.”

### HUMOR ADVICE

“Don’t deliver humor in a way that will make someone feel bad. Don’t be the guy who puts

the bucket on top of the door.”

## HELEN PAPADOPOULOS

Also known as “Mrs. Pop,” algebra teacher at Suzanne Middle School in Walnut, California Teacher of the Year in 2007, and Walnut Valley Education Association member.

### HER SHTICK

Keeps random toys from the 99 cent store in her apron pocket and hands them out ceremonially with utmost seriousness for correct answers. Pretends it is “breaking her heart” to part with such items. A UCLA fan, she pretends to be angry and “riled up” when students wear USC sweatshirts to class. Asks students to rub their tummies and pat their heads at the same time to “get both the left and right sides of their brain working.”

### REASON FOR USING HUMOR

“In the technological age we live in with personal networking sites like MySpace and Facebook — plus videogames — we must compete to get their attention. The more animated and crazier I am, the more they pay attention.”

### HUMOR ADVICE

“Let students know we don’t cross that line between what’s funny and what’s disrespectful. Show them by your example.”

## JEFFREY LUSCHER

Math teacher at Santiago High School, winner of 2008 Presidential Award for Math and Science, and Corona-Norco Teachers Association member.

### HIS SHTICK

Imitations of cartoon characters Dudley Do-Right and Donald Duck. Master of “strange looks,” facial expressions and vocal intonations. Telling funny stories about “dumb things I did.” Holding “Disco Day” in math classes. Rocking out to music such as “Gotta Separate It” by Offspring to make a point about separating numerals.

### REASON FOR USING HUMOR

“Breaks down preconceived opinions that math is boring.”

### BEST JOKE ON STUDENTS

Telling a precalculus honors class sarcastically that a wrong solution must be the “new math,” and watching them write it down verbatim in their notebooks.

## DARREN THOMAS

History teacher at Chaparral High School and Temecula Valley Educators Association member.

### HIS SHTICK

Humorous monologues about funny moments in history. Best known for having AP students “enshrine” great Americans into a Hall of Fame in the form of a Mr. or Mrs. Potato Head, complete with induction ceremony, speeches, dinner and a display of famous Potato Heads in his classroom. Deciding who gets immortalized has a serious side: It leads to debate and discussion about who is worthy and why. There is also a Potato Head Hall of Shame for villains.

### REASON FOR USING HUMOR

“It leads to motivation. Teenagers are funny; the littlest thing motivates them. Tell a few jokes and they want to do all kinds of work for you.”

### ALAINA IRWIN

World and U.S. history teacher at Hanford West High School and Hanford Secondary Education Association member.

### HER SHTICK

Using finger puppets of such figures as Gandhi, Plato and Socrates to act out historic events. Standing on a chair and singing when students are not paying attention. Flipping the light switch on and off to indicate that students are “going back in time.”

### REASON FOR USING HUMOR

“Students really do learn when they are laughing. That’s because they are paying attention.”

### HUMOR ADVICE

“Don’t be afraid to be kooky — even if you’re making a fool of yourself.”

### Quiz

How’s Your Sense of Classroom Humor?

1. In the middle of giving a lecture about ancient history, you notice students are daydreaming or tuning you out. You decide to:

A. Plead with them to pay attention. B. Give up in exasperation and tell them to read the information themselves in silence. C. Assign a pop quiz. D. Act out the roles of Plato and Socrates in dramatic fashion. E. Put on finger puppets to re-enact historical scenes in funny voices. Then give students a turn.

2. You want to demonstrate to students how to organize their binders. You decide to:

A. Show them a perfectly organized binder and praise it profusely. B. Lecture them about how disorganization can lead to poor classroom performance. C. Warn that if their notebook is messy, they will be punished with a lower grade. D. Explain in a choked up voice that you will be filled with so much joy you just might cry with happiness if they have a nicely organized binder and wipe away imaginary tears. E. Show them a "sample" of an extremely messy binder belonging to an imaginary student. Act out dramatically how you are unable to find anything! Re-enact a student frantically rummaging through his binder who is unable to locate his notes that are allowed on a test. Say with great sadness, "If only I had listened to my teacher, I would have gotten an A!"

3. It's time to explain the newly enacted campus dress code. You decide to:

A. Read passages from the memo delivered from the school board. B. Have students write down passages of the memo as a writing exercise. C. Poke fun at a certain student who wears a baseball cap, flip-flops and shorts every day and then announce such items of clothing are no longer allowed. D. Hold up certain items of clothing and ask students if they think they are still allowed. Give away small prizes for every correct answer. E. Arrive to class wearing a baseball cap, sunglasses, Hawaiian shorts over your trousers and flip-flops. Walk around snapping your fingers and looking ridiculous. Announce that such items are no longer allowed on campus and remove them promptly.

*Answers: A's and B's are worth zero points on the humor scale. C's are worth minus 5 points for being counterproductive — punitive or humiliating for students. D's and E's are worth a zillion points — they show a good sense of humor and will endear you to students for making class fun.*

Seven inventive ways to bring humor into the classroom

- Reserve a corner of your board for a "Joke of the Day" or "Funny Factoid of the Day."
- Set aside a few minutes to allow students to share funny stories or events from their lives.
- Post funny quotes and class rules around the room.
- Plan themed, daylong classroom events such as "Space Alien Day" or "Funny Hat Day."
- Plan frequent activities that allow students to act out, sing, or perform material in front of class.
- Play Password, Taboo, Apples to Apples and other face-to-face games when teaching vocabulary.
- Post funny quotes and class rules around the room.

*From Michael Lovorn, humor researcher and California Faculty Association member.*

But what if I'm not funny?

Eight proven laughter-inducing techniques from humor researcher

Micheal Lovorn

- Visit the classroom of your school's resident "humor laureate." Unsure who that might be? Ask the students.
- Use the strategies of others (comedians, clowns, and other highly regarded professionals) to build a culture of humor while you grow in confidence.
- Use props such as false noses, boisterous hats, or puppets as you teach.
- Discuss behavior expectations by sharing humorous classroom episodes from past years or semesters.
- Study the stages of humor development to better understand what amuses students of various ages.
- Poke fun at yourself with self-effacing humor.
- Encourage students to focus their humor skills on the curriculum, and provide opportunities for them to express these skills in their art, music, and drama.
- Check out some books on humor, including: *Laughing Lessons* by Ron Burgess; *If They're Laughing They Just Might Be Listening* by Elaine Lundberg and Cheryl Miller; *The Laughing Classroom* by Diana Loomans and Karen Kolberg; and *Humor as an Instructional Defibrillator* by Ronald Berk.

MICHAEL LOVORN Humor researcher and California Faculty Association member

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