TEACHING 101

Man That's Funny!

Using Humor in the Classroom

Nothing beats a great joke or funny story to make a point, illustrate an idea or change someone's point of view. Legendary speakers from Lincoln to Aesop had a bag of anecdotes and gags on-hand to add punch to a presentation. And, a well-placed quip can really zing a message home, or save a potentially humiliating situation.

Saving Face

Using an overhead projector, an instructor was diligently explaining the loading mechanism of a bolt action rifle. In the dimly lit room, he didn't see the long legs of a young student, stretched their full-length in the aisle. As he turned toward the class, he tripped over the student's legs and did a face-plant on the floor. The instructor popped up, embarrassed and boiling mad. After taking a deep breath, the instructor asked the boy to stand. The young man, not knowing what to expect, stood up -- and up -- and up.

"Wow!" shouted the instructor, "You are tall! Are you related to Michael Jordan?" The class laughed. "I guess I'd better get a new pair of glasses so I can see where I'm going," continued the instructor. "Meanwhile, if you'll sit up in your chair, I'll watch where I'm going."

The instructor had the power to humiliate the student, if he had followed up on his initial reaction. Instead, he used some quick humor to diffuse a potential conflict, gained a friend and the respect of his class. Students aren't the only ones who can be saved by a little verbal agility. You can use humor to anticipate troubles at the blackboard for example, "If you have trouble reading my handwriting, don't worry, I can't read it either."

Some of these bits can be kept handy for regular use, but it's often the spur of the moment response that has the greatest value. "Yes you can make the three-quarters of a mile to 7-11 and back, on our 15-minute break -- if you're the Flash." "If you're not raising your hand to end hunger, bring about world peace or pay off the national debt, I'm afraid it'll have to wait until the break."

Do the Twist

When confronted about his advanced age as a presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan assured the press that he would not hold his opponent's "youth and inexperience" against him. It can be very effective to put a humorous twist on things. Instead of saying Nevada is the most

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the audience could tell someone was really hurt, they wouldn't laugh. This doesn't just work for physical humor; hurt feelings can sap the "funny" right out of what might be otherwise a good joke. Any kind of slur, racial, sexual, religious or cultural is totally unacceptable. The simple test is the question, "Would I be mad or hurt if this joke were told about me?"

The Law of Dominant Contrast

There is a rule in art and photography that says the eye is drawn to the object that is light or dark, colorful or plain, and stands out from the rest of the picture. In a figurative way, the same can be said for humor and seriousness.

When reviewing the reasons why we don't want to put a loaded firearm in a vehicle, a humorous case study is given of a 50 year old woman who accidentally shot through the floor of her truck at a check station. The class laughs and immediately the instructor follows up with a grim and sad story of a seven year old who lost his leg when his father put a loaded rifle in the truck and it went off. There is no laughter. The point is powerfully made.

Humor is a powerful tool to establish credibility, create a solid teacher-pupil bond and open a relaxed learning environment. But, humor should always be appropriate. Never tell a joke, even on yourself, that would cast a shadow on the credibility and good name of your teaching team. And of course, truly dangerous and illegal situations are no laughing matter. Remember, "The truth is often said in jest," and "Laugh and the world laughs with you." —David Knotts and Les Smith