

Using Humor in the Classroom

Laughter has the power to fuel engagement and help students learn

By Robert McNeely, special for NEA.org

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Illinois English teacher Tracee O. used to dread teaching grammar and mechanics. That is, until she started using humorous, real-life examples of what not to do in her lessons. "You can find so many examples on the Internet: cakes with misspelled words, advertisements or signs that use improper punctuation, etc.," she says. "I started a [Pinterest board with examples](#), so I'll draw from those when we need to review a skill while writing." Now, teaching English "is a lot more fun for everyone," she says.

ARTICLE SECTIONS

[Create a Comfortable Learning Environment](#)
[Fire Up Their Brains](#)
[Bring Content to Life](#)
[Final Thoughts](#)

But beyond the fun factor, humor can be an effective way to engage students and activate learning. We asked NEA members to share some of the ways they use humor in the classroom and here's what they told us.

Create a Comfortable Learning Environment

When teachers share a laugh or a smile with students, they help students feel more comfortable and open to learning. Using humor brings enthusiasm, positive feelings, and optimism to the classroom.

"Because I know that a good laugh eases tension, increases creativity, ... I will do almost anything to get the class rolling with laughter — voice inflections, exaggerated facial expressions and movements, hilarious personal stories (of which I have way too many), ridiculous examples...and I encourage my students to do the same."

— Kaywin Cottle, Speech Communications teacher (NEA Facebook)

Even if you're not naturally funny, you still can lighten things up a bit.

"In Health class, we learned the cerebellum is

responsible for balance and coordination. When I trip over their backpacks, I might make a joke that my cerebellum is taking a nap.”

—Deirdre Sexton (NEA Facebook)

The key thing to remember is to do what’s comfortable for you. Not only will it make you more approachable, it will also help put students more at ease in your classroom.

Fire Up Their Brains

During her research on learning and humor, educator-researcher Mary Kay Morrison looked at brain scans that showed high levels of activity in multiple areas of the brain when humor was used in conversation and instruction.

“We’re finding humor actually lights up more of the brain than many other functions in a classroom,” says Morrison, author of *Using Humor to Maximize Learning*. “In other words, if you’re listening just auditorily in a classroom, one small part of the brain lights up, but humor maximizes learning and strengthens memories.”

Bring Content to Life

Teachers can use humor to bring content to life— through games, parody, or comical voices (or wigs or hats). Students respond to their teacher’s playfulness and appreciate the effort he or she puts into making a lesson fun. Here’s how three teachers (on [NEA Today Facebook](#)) use humor to bring content to life:

“I make it a point to share my favorite silly books with the class. Then I ham it up as I read! They get fluency modeled for them and learn to love the books. It makes me more of a person to them, too!”

—Cherish Michael Blair

“Whenever I can I use puns, anecdotes, or whatever humorous things I can think of to make lessons more fun, more relevant, and more effective. We laugh every day and it makes being in school a little more fun.”

—Laurie Knox

“I teach French and Spanish. I have students practice vocabulary by trying to come up with funny combinations of words. Like ‘helado de pescado’—fish ice cream.”

—Ann Braun

Final Thoughts

Every teacher’s goal is to be effective in the classroom and help students learn. Educators want their students to be eager and engaged. Humor has the power to fuel that engagement.

“Humor must be used in the classroom,” says Pamela Matway, a sixth-grade social studies teacher at Sedgwick Middle School, in West Hartford, Connecticut. “Joke, laugh, dance, sing, shout. I do it all; I think every teacher should. It helps kids stay focused on the lesson, and

sometimes it even helps them remember ideas and motivates them. So stand up on that desk and tap dance while you give instructions, talk in an English accent, or sing the answers to a homework assignment.”

