Understanding Humour: A Teacher’s Handbook

by

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# Understanding Humour: A Teacher’s Handbook

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There is little success where there is little laughter.

Andrew Carnegie (Carnegie, 1902)

In the first place God made idiots. This was for practice. Then He made School Boards.

Mark Twain (Twain, 1996)

A humour book for teachers—is that the set-up or the punch line?

Schools and humour are two things that most people wouldn’t consider putting together unless, of course, they were making fun of schools. Schools, after all, are serious places where serious learning takes place in a serious manner, seriously. But take a quick walk through almost any school and you will hear laughter—in the halls, in the classrooms, even in the teacher’s lounge. When you get right down to it, schools are practically infested with humour. But humour itself is seldom examined or discussed at school—which is strange, because the whole point of school is to examine and discuss things. Schools are about education, so why isn’t there education about humour? After all, humour is a universal human condition almost unparalleled in its versatility. It can be a personality trait, a form of communication, an art form, or a part of a social relationship. It can be used as a way to cope with stress, a motivational tool, and as a form of both reward and punishment. It can create a sense of belonging in the classroom and it can be used to lessen the blow of criticism (Martin, 2007).

Humour is a victim of its own success. We use it so freely and frequently that we simply take it for granted. It’s like breathing; we can control it when we want to, but most of the time we just let it happen. This ease with humour can make it appear to be a characteristic rather than an ability—something that you have in a predetermined and set quantity. And if humour is a
characteristic, then understanding humour would make no more sense than understanding your eye colour. But the simplicity of humour is an illusion—like the calm surface of an ocean that is teeming with life underneath, the more you immerse yourself in it the larger it becomes.

Humour is not a fixed characteristic; it is not even a simple skill; instead it is a jumble of emotions, abilities, cultural practices, and personal preferences. It is not simple, but horribly intricate and seemingly contradictory. Why would you laugh when someone slips and falls but be in a state of shock if you saw that same person hit by a car? They are essentially the same thing, only with a difference of intensity. And why do people make jokes among friends that they’d be fired for saying at work? And why do people often use the most cutting and (on the surface at least) insulting humour with the people they like the best? In a school setting how do you tell the difference between a student calling another student a “loser” in a funny, we-can-both-take-it, sort of way, from a student calling another student a “loser” as part of bullying? Perhaps more fundamentally, why would anyone say one thing, but mean something else, and why would someone else find this funny?

It is important to understand humour because humour is a superpower. It allows you to say one thing, mean another, and deny them both. Pay attention next time you’re in a line-up, or out at dinner, or in the classroom. Someone will be using humour—it might even be you. Through humour the greatest of defeats can be turned into modest victories, awkward topics can be put on offer then taken away just as quickly if met with a negative reaction, and friends can demonstrate the closeness of their relationship by insulting each other. And there is no quicker way to know if you truly belong to a group than whether or not you are “in” on the jokes. If you don’t get the joke, you’re not in the group, and you might even be who they are laughing at.
Perhaps most telling of all, being accused of lacking a sense of humour is an insult that hits the heart of what it means to be human.

Humour is a tool and like most tools it can be used for the good, the bad, and the other. Humour can build up and tear down—in fact, it can do both at the same time. And it is perhaps this dangerous element of humour, especially its ability to undermine rules and authority that might explain why humour is not a “soft skill” that is actively encouraged in our schools such as leadership and courtesy. Humour is like sex, everybody does it (or wants to do it) but nobody ever tells you how to do it better. But sex is at least talked about, and sex education helps students behave responsibly in an activity not necessarily encouraged by the school administration. In a similar way some form of humour education could be useful in helping students develop the knowledge and vocabulary they need to use humour safely and effectively.

The lack of humour education in schools is even stranger given the current emphasis on literacy and communication. Humour is a fundamental form of human communication yet students are not informed about its uses and its dangers. They are simply told “that’s not funny” when a teacher or principal decides they’ve crossed over the line—a line the student may have stridden across on purpose, or that they might never have been aware of. Students need a better understanding of humour if they are to know how to use it and, in order to give them this teachers also need a better understanding of humour. And that is the purpose of this handbook, to help teachers see humour for what it is—an opportunity. By knowing what humour can do and how to use it right, humour can be a powerful force in the classroom. Teachers who use humour well are more highly rated by students, help students engage and recall material, and are able discover what students are really thinking (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011).
It is also important to understand humour in order to limit its misuse. Humour can cause pain and humiliation and be used to isolate others. Sometimes these incidents are the results of a misunderstanding and sometimes they are part of a larger problem such as bullying (Mills and Carwile, 2009). Teachers need to be careful when using humour. Although it is a great way to create more open relationships with students it can also cause great damage when used carelessly.

This book will not make you funny, will not help you write jokes, and will not make you the life of the party, but it just might help you take humour a little more seriously.
PART 1: Teacher Humour

A very wise old teacher once said: “I consider a day’s teaching is wasted if we do not all have one hearty laugh.” He meant that when people laugh together, they cease to be young and old, master and pupils, workers and driver, jailer and prisoner, they become a single group of human beings enjoying its existence.

Gilbert Highet (Highet, 1950)

Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth, or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humor?"

Frank Moore Colby (Colby, 1926)

The logical way to begin this handbook would be to give a detailed description of the evolutionary origins of humour, how humour develops over childhood, a list of theories about humour that are often contradictory and mostly incomprehensible, and then a definition of humour that does not stand up to concerted scrutiny. Fortunately for you, I have decided not to start this way (although I will do all of this later).

Instead I have decided to begin by giving you what you want. I know that the first thing any self-respecting teacher will ask themselves when picking up a handbook of humour is, “What are the implications of this for the practical application of pedagogy and classroom management in learning environments?”

Admit it, you thought it too.

Well, I am delighted to be able to tell you. There are in fact two broad ways that teachers can use humour to improve their classroom functioning. The first is by incorporating humour
“bits” into lessons to make information more accessible and memorable and the second is to use humour when communicating with students to create a positive classroom atmosphere. And, before we get started, just remember that students rate teachers who use humour more highly than those who don’t (Fortson & Brown, 1998)—not that you care what they think, or anything.

**Using Humour in Lessons and Tests**

Well, that’s the saving grace of humor; if you fail, at least no one is laughing at you.

A. Whitney Brown (Accardi, 1991)

Using a humourous “bit” is a great way to liven up a lesson. By “bit” I mean a self-contained, purposely crafted unit of humour. This can be a funny story, a cartoon, a song, a video clip, anything that has been made and planned in advance. The best thing about using humour bits is that their use does not rely on you being funny. If you are telling a story, then your comedic talents can certainly add to the material, but you can also use bits created by someone else that stand up on their own. Properly adding humorous bits to your lessons can increase student retention of material, lead to higher student results on tests, and create more student engagement (Garner, 2006). Of course, the key is using it “properly.” You can’t just put in an old Saturday Night Live DVD and expect the test scores to soar. Here are a few things to keep in mind before you put a little funny into your lessons.

**Make it relevant.** The comedy bit you use must relate directly to what you are teaching. It should illustrate a key point, or reinforce an important part of the material (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). A funny bit is likely to stand out above all other elements of your lesson, so it is vitally important that the point made in the humour is the point you want them to take away.
For example, say you are introducing a unit on public speaking and you want the class to be aware of the importance of making eye contact, not talking too quickly, and not making distracting movements with your arms. There are many ways you could use humour to reinforce this point. You could find a cartoon that demonstrates this, you can tell a story about a time when you made a presentation and how it went disastrously wrong, you could even act out a short comedic routine demonstrating how bad habits can undermine an oral presentation by looking at your feet, talking too quickly, crumpling your speaking notes with your twitchy fingers, and continuously twirling your hair (or you could find a video of someone else doing this). In all of these examples the humour is emphasizing the exact thing you want the students to remember. And if the students find it funny they will be more likely to recall it later.

Conversely, if you are talking about public speaking and then go into some story about your wedding night when your drunken uncle made an inappropriate speech and then your wife’s father punched him in the face, it will not be as effective. Students might find it funny—they might even find it funnier than any of the previous suggestions I’ve made—but the key points will be lost. They might take away a couple of things that could be helpful—such as not being drunk while making a speech, and that just because someone is family doesn’t mean you have to invite them to your wedding—but the specific points about making eye contact, taking your time, and not fidgeting will not be remembered. It might also bring back some bad memories for you.

**Pick your moments.** You are a teacher, not a clown (although the gap is sometimes small). What makes a humour bit powerful is that it stands out, just as anything that is different from the standard routine is likely to. Humour is the spice, not the meal. It is an unusual way to relay information that will, if you use it too much, become, well, usual. If you put up a different cartoon to illustrate every point you’re making it will soon lose its effectiveness. And if you try
to create a comedy routine for every single lesson you are setting yourself up for disappointment. Stand-up comedians can take years to create a one hour set of jokes that are solid and reliable, so trying to create a new routine for every single lesson is a lofty goal prone to desperate failure. You might even become the most wretched of beasts: the unfunny person trying to be funny.

You should also consider where in the lesson you want to use the humour. Humour bits can be an effective introduction at the beginning of a class, as a transition between topics, and to end a class.

*At the beginning.* Using a humour bit can be a great way to start a class, especially when there is a key point to the lesson you would like the students to think about—humour is an excellent way to look at a subject in a new way. If, for example, you were teaching about Roman History and had just covered many of the literary and philosophical highlights but now wanted to demonstrate that Roman society contained regular people too, you could put this list of quotations up on the board:

- “I hope your hemorrhoids rub together so much that they hurt worse than they ever have before!”
- “Phileros is a eunuch!”
- “We have wet the bed, host. I confess we have done wrong. If you want to know why, there was no chamber pot.”

Ask the students where they thought these quotations might be from. (You can even tell them they’re not in the Aeneid, if you want to help them out). These quotations are, in fact, all examples of Roman graffiti from the lava-buried city of Pompeii (Missouri State, 2012). They demonstrate that the Romans were just as fond of scribbling offensive things on the walls back
then as we are today. Through humour you have changed their point of view about the Romans and can begin to talk about them more as real people (the Romans not your students).

I will share one more piece of graffiti with you, although you might not want to write this on the board. “The one who buggers a fire, burns his penis.” A little crude, sure, but good advice none-the-less.

*As a transition.* Students often have trouble refocusing from one task to another. A humour bit can help them make the transition by grabbing their attention in a way that engages them in the new material. This approach can help eliminate the talking and muttering and general shuffling about that often occurs at these moments. Using humour as a transition is very similar to using humour at the start of the lesson because what you are doing is changing the students’ frame of reference through the use of something funny.

Perhaps you’ve been finishing off a unit in algebra but want to spend the second half of the class reviewing what might be on an upcoming test. A cartoon highlighting a problem with taking a math test might be a good way to introduce this.
Wrapping things up. It’s quite easy for a lesson to finish awkwardly with a few minutes left or to have students looking at the clock instead of at you near the end of class. A little humour is a good way to close a lesson and review a key point while keeping the students’ minds occupied with the subject at hand. This technique can be especially helpful after a long stretch of activity that might have taxed or bored them (yes, I know this never happens when you teach). By ending with a bit of humour the students get one last chance of processing what they’ve just gone over. If you’ve spent the day describing the vastness of Canada, for example, you could play a song by the Arrogant Worms that reinforces this concept called Canada’s Really Big (this is a very well-written song which I recommend without hesitation).

Know your audience. There is a very real possibility that your students do not completely share your sense of humour. Some of this has to do with age. Illustrating an interesting point about good food choices in a Grade 3 class by using a cartoon from the New Yorker might not get a laugh simply because the students are not developmentally ready for that kind of humour (Glenwright & Pexman, 2010) (I have come to the conclusion that I am also not developmentally ready for cartoons from the New Yorker). You might be better to go with Garfield. The opposite problem can also happen—you can get laughs when you don’t want them because the students are at an age where they find certain things hilariously funny. Be especially careful using the word “balls” if you are teaching a Grade 8 class.

A lot of humour depends on experience and knowledge, so before using any humorous material try to think if the students will have the knowledge needed to appreciate the joke. The funny Shakespearian allusions you find so droll might only work with that one kid who has read the Complete Works on his own and says thee and thine in regular speech. References to TV
sitcoms you watched as a kid are also likely to fall flat. If you can keep up with pop culture, even a bit, you will greatly enhance your ability to make jokes the students can relate to.

Sadly, even if you do create a bit that works in a class, another class might not find it funny. Every class is different, so get to know them and get to know what they find funny. The ability to share humour is an important indicator of how well one person understands another (Ziv, 2010), so by finding humour your class likes, you are also demonstrating that you have taken the time to get to know who they are.

Make it good (and don’t be afraid to use the professionals). One of the wonderful things about using humour is that you know right away whether it works or not—the audience either laughs or doesn’t. Of course, when you tell a joke and nobody laughs it might not seem like a blessing, but it is. It lets you know that what you just did failed and that you need to either fix it or throw it away. If you try something out and it doesn’t work, you shouldn’t drop it immediately. Try to find out what happened. Rewrite it, or do it a bit differently next time. But if it still isn’t getting a laugh, then it’s probably best to move on. Good humour is great, but bad humour is painful.

Not everyone has the ability to craft good, funny stuff that sums up all the points you would like to make. There are even some poor souls who, as much as they like a joke, couldn’t tell one to save their lives (fortunately, having to tell a joke to save one’s life is a very rare occurrence and is outlawed by the Geneva Convention). Does this mean they can’t use humour? Of course not, that would be like forbidding the tone-deaf from playing recorded music. There is a wealth of professional material out there that you can use. The Horrible History books, for example, are excellent sources to punch up a history class. The band, They Might be Giants, have several albums of humorous songs on subjects such as math, the alphabet and science. And,
of course, a well-chosen Dilbert cartoon might be able to make a useful point in careers. All you have to do is keep your eye out for what might work for your class and do a little research on this thing called the “internet.”

**Humour on tests.** Tests are tricky. One problem with tests is that some students perform poorly on them simply because they get anxious taking them. So if you could relieve some of this stress it might be very helpful in getting these students to perform in a manner more reflective of their abilities. And what’s one thing that puts people at ease? You know where I’m going with this—humour.

Yes, you can put a funny cartoon, or a joke question, or some ridiculous answers on the multiple choice questions such as:

**WHAT IS THE CAPITAL OF CANADA?**

1: Toronto  
2: Montreal  
3: Ottawa  
4: “C”

Get it? “C” is the capital letter in Canada. Okay, maybe it’s not that funny.

Unfortunately, putting jokes on tests has been shown to be ineffective (McMorris, Boothroyd, & Pietroangelo, 1997). A possible explanation for this is that for someone to get a joke they have to be in a relaxed, receptive state—not in a struggle for survival (Fry, 1963). So jokes on tests will be appreciated by the very people who don’t need them--those who are relaxed and not taking the test too seriously. For the people you are trying to help, however, the jokes might make them even more stressed, especially if they don’t get it. On the question above,
for example, they might panic and think “well, the capital in Canada is letter C, but it’s also Ottawa… do I circle them both?”

When people are stressed or tired they tend to lose their sense of humour (this is why it is never advisable to make jokes about one’s spouse in the morning). In essence it is possible to become humour-blind. If someone in this state encounters a joke where they are not expecting one, it will simply confuse them. They will wonder if they missed something when they were studying. At this exact moment, they might hear the relaxed student beside them laughing softly and this will throw them off even more.

This doesn’t mean you can’t put something humorous on a test. But it might be better at the end then at the beginning, and you should make sure that there is no way for it to be taken seriously as part of the test. The research on using humour on tests seems to show that the net effect is a wash (McMorris, Boothroyd, & Pietroangelo, 1997), so if you really want to do it, go ahead. Just don’t expect the students who are fidgeting and chewing off the ends of their pencils to find it funny.
Using Humour to Communicate with Students

Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.

Victor Borge

Never say a humorous thing to a man who does not possess humor. He will always use it in evidence against you.

Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (Pearson, 1956)

It would be wonderful to simply create a lesson plan, implement it, and have its knowledge absorbed by passive yet appreciative students. Unfortunately, this seldom, if ever, happens outside the realm of classroom management videos. Teaching is an interactive and often interrupted activity, meaning that sometimes you will have to interact with your students in unscripted and unplanned ways. You might have to tell them to stop doing something, you might have to tell them to start doing something—they might even want to tell you something! How you choose to communicate with your students creates the atmosphere of your classroom, and I would kindly suggest that you use a bit of humour every once and a while.

When students are asked what they most appreciate in a teacher, a sense of humour consistently ranks among the top of the list (Bryant, Zillmann, Comisky, & Crane, 1980). It is, of course, entirely possible to teach a class without humour and most of us have taken a class like this. It is not fun. I know learning doesn’t have to be fun, but at the same time there’s no reason it can’t be a little enjoyable at least once in a while. But it is more than just a question of fun. If you do not allow (or encourage) students to communicate with you through humour you are also shutting down an entire mode of communication: the non-serious mode. By doing this you are
eliminating a useful source of information from and about your students and are also missing an opportunity to create a sense of belonging and trust in your classroom.

**Serious and Non-serious Modes of Communication.**

There are many ways to classify communication: verbal/nonverbal, formal/informal, simple/complex. Communication can also be divided into the serious and non-serious modes (Mulkay, 1988). Both these modes have their strengths and weaknesses so it is not a question of using one or the other but knowing when, and how, to use both.

**The serious mode of communication.** Serious communication says what it means. If you say, “it’s a nice day” and you are being serious, then you mean it is a nice day. The serious mode is used whenever we want to state something in a straightforward manner and want our information or opinion taken as a statement of what we believe is true. Formal communications (instructions, invitations, and contracts) are almost always in the serious mode. There is a simple reason for this; they are relaying official information where it is important to have only one possible interpretation of the facts. You wouldn’t want to sign a contract, for example, only to have the other person say, “I was only kidding,” when it comes time for them to pay you.

There are many places where serious communication is expected—border crossings, police investigations, academic papers, just to name a few. These are all places and situations where exactness in meaning is vital, where accuracy is paramount, and where fun is in short supply. Extreme examples of this are military combat orders, emergency response communications, and airport to control tower protocols. I think most people would agree that
these are not situations where saying one thing but meaning another would lead to anything but trouble.

Serious communication works well when everyone agrees on the system or the facts. It is not as useful in situations involving multiple points of view, especially when the purpose of interaction isn’t necessarily to accomplish a specific task but to create relationships and social bonds. In many fluid, dynamic, or ambiguous situations, non-serious communication can be a more appropriate response. Two strangers who meet awkwardly at the checkout counter, unsure of who should get the next spot in line, will often interact with a laugh or a joke to let the other one know that this is no big deal. If, however, they both immediately state a hard opinion of fact (“I’m next.” “No, I’m next.”) it is quite possible for this situation to escalate into an unnecessarily stressful situation. Humour helps us avoid these types of things.

The non-serious mode of communication. The non-serious mode of communication is the mode of humour and playfulness (Mulkay, 1988). Things said in a non-serious way are an invitation to play, to conceive of things differently, to find more than one meaning, to discover what others are comfortable with. There is usually some sort of factual or quasi-factual message in the non-serious mode, but it is flexible and indefinite, allowing both sides to modify their position. The non-serious mode of communication is very common in day-to-day interactions. Pay attention to the people around you and you will notice how often it is used to play, to bond, and to have fun.

Non-serious communication allows the creator of the humour to say something but also be able to disclaim it. It also allows the receiver of the humour to take the statement at face value, take it as a joke, or take it as a bit of both. These multiple meanings are a great asset in
delivering certain types of information, especially on subjects that are awkward or uncomfortable. Non-serious communication gives everyone an opportunity to save face.

Of course, the vagueness of non-serious communication can be a liability to the point that it is formally or implicitly banned in certain situations. In airports it is a criminal offense to make a joke about bombs. Any statement you make about a bomb will be taken literally (in the serious mode) by the security person and not as humour. So if airport security lifts up your crumpled crusty sock and asks, “What is this?” and you say “A bomb,” the security officer is not going to receive your statement as an invitation to play. Instead she will take it as an invitation to call the police. Sure, she might laugh at home that night, but she will not be laughing at that moment. Another example of the banning of the non-serious mode is apparent in cultures and religions that consider certain places or items sacred and any non-serious discussion of these things to be blasphemous. These are, however, extreme situations, and if your classroom resembles airport security or the altar of a holy shrine, you might want to consider livening things up a little.

**How Humorous Communication Helps in the Classroom.**

Anyone who takes himself too seriously always runs the risk of looking ridiculous; anyone who can consistently laugh at himself does not.

Vaclav Havel (Havel, 1991)

Is there really anything wrong with running your classroom like a military battalion or making your students revere you as a sacred object? Well, it all boils down to what you want your classroom to be like and, in a larger sense, what you want the world to be like. As demonstrated above, places where humour is forbidden are generally places people don’t want to be for long. They tend to be situations where answers are either right or wrong, where there is a clear hierarchy of power, and where information flows from the top to the bottom. You could
choose to rule your classroom with black and white rules using simple rewards and punishments, and make the students to pretend to agree with you, but if you do, please note that the students, instead of making jokes with you, will be making jokes at you. (Behind your back of course. Or on the bathroom walls.)

If you would rather live in a world where information flows both ways, where rules bend a bit depending on the circumstances, and where fun and play are sometimes allowed, then using humour with your students might just be the thing for you. You will reap the benefits. Communicative humour, when used well, can lead to many helpful things.

*Positive atmosphere.* The days of teacher as drill sergeant seem to be gone. Teachers today are encouraged to help students find ways to learn and to encourage individual differences instead of using a one-size-fits-all way of teaching. If this is the approach you would like to use, then having the students feel comfortable enough with you to tell you how they feel would be a great help. By using humour in a positive way students will be much more inclined to offer you this information. As with most things you must lead by example. A teacher who makes a mistake, admits it, and jokes about it with the students is sending a very different message from the teacher who never admits and error and refuses to be the butt of any joke.

Communicative humour is very different from using comedy bits. When using comedy bits in a lesson the humour is a form of performance. The teacher performs and the students (hopefully) receive and appreciate—there is no expectation for them to reply. Using humour effectively in communication, however, is an exchange and not a monologue. If you make jokes about the students, but the students don’t make jokes about you, there is the possibility that there is either a real or perceived imbalance of power in your classroom—that the students feel intimidated by you instead of welcomed. You don’t want to be like the boss at the Christmas
party who expects everyone to laugh at his jokes, but as soon as Roger in accounting (who’s had just a little too much punch) makes a joke back (a joke that everyone has been saying behind the boss’s back for years) the boss fires poor Roger, who has a very un-merry Christmas.

As a teacher you are in a position of power, you set the tone of the classroom, and it can be hard for kids to get over that. By demonstrating that you can take a joke as well as give one, students will feel more comfortable talking to you. They will also feel less fearful about making mistakes if they know they have the option of laughing it off.

**Taking the Sting out of Criticism.** One way to make students feel more comfortable is to use humour in some of your feedback to them. Humour is often used in situations where you want to inform someone that something they do bothers you, but don’t want to come right out and say it (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young & Heerey, 2001). If there is a point you want to get across to a student, but do you do not want them to get defensive, you might be best to tell them through humour. This is a delicate matter, however, and there are a few things you should consider before telling your student to “give your invisible homework-eating dog a pat on the head from me next time you see it.”

**Humour must be clear and appropriate.** Yes, I know the whole point of humour is that it isn’t always clear, but what I mean by this is that your intentions for using humour in these situations should be clear. You need to let the student know that there is something they’re doing that you want them to change, but that it isn’t a huge deal…yet. To do this you can’t be too clever. Irony, for example, can be an effective way to talk to teenagers, but should be avoided with younger children because there is a good chance they will not understand you meant something as a joke (Glenwright & Pexman, 2010). They might either miss your point completely, or they might feel even more insulted than if you just gave them the feedback straight up. There are also children
who have trouble decoding humour and are naturally more receptive to taking things at face value (Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2004). For these students, using humour in feedback might be counter-productive.

*Relationships must be reciprocal.* If you can make a joke about the student but the student can’t make a joke about you, there is a chance that you are not being funny but are merely being a bully. Students will only take your jokes about their possible shortcomings in good humour if they know you would do the same if they made a joke about something annoying that *you* do. Yes, it’s hard to believe, but you might actually be doing things that annoy your students.

Perhaps you mumble, or talk to fast, or always wear the same cardigan on Monday. If they can let you know with a joke (“Thanks for wearing the green cardigan, Mr. S., I wasn’t sure what day it was.”) and if sometimes you actually listen, you’ll all be better for it.

*Humour can’t be your only tool.* Humour can be great, but it can also be a crutch. If you only give your students feedback by making jokes it is possible that they will stop taking you seriously. Maybe that’s what you’re going for, but with most classrooms there will come a time when you need to establish things clearly and let the students know, in the serious mode, what you expect of them. And by using a mix of methods you will encourage them to take your good-natured humorous feedback to heart in order to avoid getting the more direct and unpleasant feedback from you.

*Make your class a community.* Humour is a form of culture (Apte, 1985). By allowing humour to be used in class, the class will develop its own collection of funny stories, jokes, and running gags that will become part of that their unique identity—they will become part of a group that’s special. They’ll talk with each other about the funny things that happened in class and might even mention some of them to students outside the class. They could even develop their own
catchphrases—comedy short-form language that symbolizes a shared comedic event or idea. Maybe they’ll say something like “Mr. Strong’s cardigan” to each other in the hallway and break out laughing. This sense of community will make it easier for the students to do group work, increase their involvement with the class, and might even mean they’ll be a little less likely to skip because they don’t want to miss out on the joke.

**How can you do this?**

Humor is the affectionate communication of insight

Leo Rosten (Rosten, 1989)

There are many wonderful things that can happen in a classroom through the use of humour. But some of you might wonder, “How can I use humour to communicate if I’m not even all that funny?” Well, it’s easier than you think. I’ll explain how by letting you in on a little-known fact that is so important that I’m going to give it its own line and put it in bold.

**Just because someone is funny doesn’t mean they have a sense of humour (and vice versa).**

What I mean by that (because it is a rather confusing statement) is that just because someone is witty or can write a joke, doesn’t mean that that person can take a joke or create a fun, positive atmosphere. I have been around a lot of stand-up comics in my day and I’ve found no correlation at all between how funny they are on stage and how much fun they are off of it. You can have the quickest of wits, but if you use it as a weapon to put others down others you will be creating a sense of fear not fun.

Having a *sense* of humour is something different altogether. It is the ability to see the absurdity of life and laugh. It is the ability to step back for a second and realize that having to
move your test date because five members of your class have a football game on the day you wanted to schedule it, isn’t the end of the world. It is the ability to look at your students and instead of thinking, “How could anyone act like that?” you think, “How did I ever act like that.” It is the ability to look at yourself through your students’ eyes and recognize just how ridiculous you must (occasionally) seem to them. That is having a sense of humour.

So don’t worry if you are not particularly quick on your feet. Communicating with humour is all about creating a place where everyone feels comfortable using humour as a way to express themselves. And, yes, I do happen to have a few friendly suggestions of things you might want to think about.

**Be Yourself.** This should be easy because you are already you. But it is surprising the number of people who are either unaware of who they are or unwilling to admit it in public. If you are the cardigan-wearing, culturally out of touch teacher who only listens to Broadway musicals and ABBA, there is no point in pretending otherwise. Accept who you are, let the students know who you are, and, when you are completely baffled by what “the kids these days” are listening to, be willing to make a joke about it. And also be willing to take a little ribbing from the students as well. They might even take pity on you and offer to play some of their “music.”

There is nothing worse than someone trying to be something they are not. You are different from the students and they will either laugh with you or at you about it. This does not mean you need to put yourself down. You can joke about yourself, but when you do so, do it from a place of pride. Revel in your peculiarities; show the students that being different can be fun, and that, most importantly, these differences can be pointed out in good humour.

**Be Open.** To create a positive atmosphere humour must flow both ways. If you joke at your students (“Josh, if you don’t work any faster that lump of mould will evolve and finish that essay
before you do!”) but freak out when they joke about you (perhaps sending Josh to the office for insubordination after he calls you “Cardigan-Man! The world’s most casual superhero!”), then the whole using-humour-to-communicate thing is not going to work for you. You have to be able to take it as well as give it out.

You should also be open to your students’ moods, feelings, and personalities. Young people haven’t developed the same thick skin to protect them from life’s injustices that most older folks have. Their moods can swing wildly and if you get the feeling that one of your students is having a “serious mode only” kind of day, then you would probably wise to speak to them directly, instead of giving them an opportunity to take something you say the wrong way. And, of course, some students react better to joking than others.

**Try to Understand.** Students often make mistakes when they are trying out new things. This also applies for humour. I experienced this firsthand when I went into teaching. I had enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program as a “mature student” so I was a little out of touch with what it meant to be a teenager. On my first round of practice teaching I was taken aback when some of the students in the class I was in started making insults about me right to my face. I didn’t react at first because I couldn’t figure out what their intentions were. Then it dawned on me—they weren’t trying to insult me, they were just trying to be humorous. They had heard that I was the “funny” new student teacher and naturally assumed I’d be able to take a joke. The problem wasn’t that they were trying to insult me—it was simply that most of them weren’t that good at making jokes, and I was equally poor at understanding their sense of humour. When I figured this out, I started responding to their jokes with some of my own, and from then on everything went smoothly.
Yes, there are times when students use humour as a way of an attacking someone and getting away with it, but it is important not to jump to that conclusion. Humour is all about intentions and it is quite possible that a student meant to be positive and funny but simply messed things up. And now the student they made the joke to is crying in the corner and you have to somehow sort everything out. What’s the simple solution to this? Well, there isn’t one. All you can do is try your best to understand everyone’s point of view and use it as an opportunity to educate students about the proper use of humour in the classroom.

Which leads me to my last piece of advice—

**Set Boundaries.** I know I have just told you to be an open and understanding person and allow humour to flow freely in the classroom. Ignore all this (but just for a minute or two). For all this wonderful talk of equality, openness, and fun it is impossible to get around the fact that YOU are the one who sets the rules and enforces the boundaries of acceptable humour in your classroom. You need to decide where the line is and be prepared to point out to the students when this line has been crossed and why it is not acceptable. And, sadly, you must also follow your rules.

If you are not consistent with the kind of humour that is allowed, if you let one student get off for the same thing another gets called on, chaos will reign, and the jokes might take on a more hurtful nature. Instead of a community of people helping each other out, you will create a classroom of gunslingers vigorously shooting each other down through verbal quips.

Set your boundaries, and when a student inevitably crosses one explain to them why this particular use of humour was unacceptable. There is a great temptation to tell a student simply “that’s not funny!” Try to avoid doing this. It is as useless as saying, “Because I said so, that’s why!” Telling a student something isn’t funny will only confuse or enrage them. They know what they just did was funny—afer all their friends laughed at it. What they really need to know
is *why* their humour is unacceptable in this circumstance. Taste in humour is like taste in music, and telling students what is and isn’t funny will get you the same reaction as telling them that the latest hip-hop-house-rap-retro-emo-punk song they love isn’t music. They will think you are out of touch or, worse yet, pity you.
Part Two: Student Humour

Humor results when society says you can't scratch certain things in public, but they itch in public.

Tom Walsh (Goodman, 1995)

If you look through the research on humour in education it’s easy to get the impression that teachers are the only people who use humour in schools. There are studies about how teachers use humour in lessons, how teachers use jokes on tests, and how teachers who use humour are better liked than teachers who don’t (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011). But there is very little research about how students use humour in schools. It’s almost as if students aren’t funny at all, and that if it weren’t for their witty teachers illustrating the Pythagorean Theorem in a side-splittingly funny way, there’d be no humour in schools at all.

This picture, however, bears little resemblance to how education and humour are perceived in popular culture. In the many movies aimed at school-aged children, teachers are portrayed either as bumbling incompetents, power mad dictators, or an out of touch unrelatable losers. Now, these movies don’t have the scientific integrity of serious educational studies, but they do tell us something. They tell us that students have a sense of humour and at least some of this sense of humour involves laughing at teachers. So it would behoove (I’ve always wanted to use that word) teachers to find out why students find them so funny.

Actually it would behoove teachers to find out why students use humour at all. The fact that students use humour is indisputable. From pre-school, to kindergarten, to elementary school, to high school, students are laughing and making jokes. In fact, some adolescents seem to lose
the ability to communicate in the serious mode altogether and speak only in sarcasm. Sure, the humour students use might not seem like humour to us, with the “poo-poo, pee-pee, ka-ka” jokes of the younger kids, and the never-ending irony-tinged talk of teenagers (“no, you *really* look cool in that cardigan, Mr. Strong”). It’s almost impossible to believe that we ever engaged in such low-brow, common, unsophisticated, and downright unfunny stuff.

Except that we did. Humour develops and changes with age and, just like most other human abilities, there are stages and a direction to it. We are not born with our sense of humour intact. Humour grows along with our emotional and cognitive abilities in response to our genetic heritage and to the world around us (McGhee, 1979). By knowing how humour develops and the expression it takes at different ages, we can understand our students better, and be confident in the knowledge that they really are just going through a phase.

**The Development of Humour**

When I was born, I was so surprised I couldn’t talk for a year and a half.

Gracie Allen

**Infants.** In the past it was generally accepted that infants did not have a sense of humour (Reddy, 2001)—and you can understand why, they’re terrible at telling jokes. But as research expanded and a more comprehensive view of humour emerged it became generally accepted that infants do use and understand humour, with some researchers claiming that a rudimentary sense of humour develops as early as a few months after birth (Reddy, Williams, & Vaughan, 2002). Most infants begin to laugh at around four months of age and it also around this time that they become sensitive to the laughter of others. Initially their laughter is limited to what they can see
and feel near them but gradually they begin to laugh at objects and events that are further away (Reddy et al., 2002).

Recently it was noticed that some infants had two different kinds of laughs—a real laugh they make when they find something funny and a fake laugh they make when they hear others laughing but don’t necessarily understand why (Reddy, 2001). This seems to show that the social nature of humour is apparent at a very young age, that the urge to join in with humour—even if it isn’t understood—is a very fundamental one. And the fake laugh is certainly a critical skill which is of great use later in life when golfing with the boss or visiting the in-laws.

Older infants often distort ordinary activities, such as eating, into humorous clowning (by doing such things as smearing food on their face). As soon as an infant knows how a certain activity is supposed to go, they seem to have fun distorting it (Loizou, 2005). Older infants also use humorous teasing, often by putting an object out to a parent then retracting it when the parent tries to grab it.

**Toddlers.** Humour in toddlers is easier to identify than in infants. Humour develops in tandem with other cognitive, physical, and emotional abilities and the appearance of skills such as walking and talking greatly expand the toddler’s range of humor. The wide variety of toddler humour—clowning, teasing, making funny sounds, mimicry, breaking rules—demonstrates just how quickly and how broadly humour is applied developmentally (Cameron, Kennedy, & Cameron, 2008). Toddlers also gain greater control over the humour they use and, by the time they’re two, can tell jokes of their own.

Toddlers use humour frequently throughout the day, most often in social situations with their family, and enjoy repeating jokes and other humorous behaviour over and over again. The social aspect of humour that toddlers are most interested in at this age is humorous intention. By
discovering that other people can intend to make actions that are purposefully wrong, toddlers begin to understand the nature of a joke. They discover this difference, and are able to joke, even before they learn to pretend or to lie (Hoicka & Gattis, 2008). They also use humour to get through difficult social situations or to assert their own will by doing such things as playfully dropping unwanted food on the floor during mealtime.

**Children.** Children have a great range of humorous skills and good deal of control over their ability to create and relate to humour by the time they go to school. Verbal humour becomes particularly noticeable at this age. Children make silly rhymes by age 4, by age 6 they can tell pre-made jokes, shortly after that they can understand jokes that are a play on words, and by around 9 years of age they can understand complex verbal riddles (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010).

In addition to being able to create more varied humour, children also develop a better understanding of the humorous intentions of others—a vitally important component of humour. After all, in order to get the joke you need to know that what was just said was *meant* as a joke. Around age 7 children start to become able to distinguish two very different forms of false statements from each other, lies and jokes (Sullivan, Winner, & Hopfield, 1995). They do this by being able to figure out the intent of the person making the false statement. If the person making the false statement doesn’t know that the child also knows that the statement is false, then they are trying to deceive the child and the statement is a lie. If the person making the false statement knows that the child also knows that the statement is false, then they cannot be trying to deceive the child, but instead must be making a joke. This ability to perceive intentions allows children to start to use and understand simple irony and sarcasm.
The increasing complexity and versatility of humour is also reflected in how children use humour in groups. As children get older humour becomes an ever more vital skill in managing social relationships and children who are not competent in using humour develop a great disadvantage when dealing with peers (Klein & Kuiper, 2006).

**Adolescents.** The term “adolescent humour” is not usually used as a compliment. Every generation laments the ironic humour and disrespectful language that is often favoured by teenagers. The durability of this discomfort is demonstrated by Harms, an educational researcher, who in 1943, “described the incessant use of irony by adolescents as a sign of poor emotional health” (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 736), implying that repeated irony use at this age was an aberration and not the norm. But it is the norm. Adults just seem to have very convenient memories of how they acted when they were adolescents (in many ways this is a blessing). Every generation seems surprised that there is an awkward period between childhood and adulthood and that children don’t suddenly turn into and competent, well-balanced, serious adults using sophisticated humour.

But don’t take it from me, here’s one of the earliest recorded instances of “kids-these-days” thinking from Hesiod in the 8th century B.C.

… ”I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words... When I was young, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly wise [disrespectful] and impatient of restraint” (Malott & Porfilio, 2011).

Yes, adults have been irritated by adolescents since before they were called adolescents. Sometimes, it seems like butterflies have it right—it would be so much easier if children went
into a cocoon around age 12 and didn’t pop back out again until their early twenties so we wouldn’t be subject to witnessing their bizarre metamorphosis. Adolescents are prone to swearing and telling sexual jokes to get laughs, and the goofy-sounding laughter of their friends just makes them do it more—and adolescent humour is often controversial and over the top (Sanford & Eder, 1984). But we should not be so hard on adolescents. The humour they use often reflects the stress of the transition between childhood and adulthood, faced as they are with the upcoming responsibilities but an incomplete understanding of what being an adult entails. Their humorous fixation with sex and other taboo topics is a result of their inability to deal with these things directly (Sanford & Eder, 1984). They want, and are told, they should start acting like adults, but still don’t have the ability or the freedom to do so.

Why Does Humour Develop?

Humor is by far the most significant activity of the human brain.

Edward De Bono (Daily Mail, 1990)

Humour might be silly, but this silliness plays an important role in human development. It helps children approach difficult or ambiguous situations in a positive state of mind, lets them discover rules and limits and feel empowered, and is an important form of social communication and bonding.

Mastering difficult things. As children develop, they are constantly being challenged by the things they are trying to master, and it could be quite easy for them to get discouraged by these challenges and abandon them. That’s where humour comes in. Children tend to find humour in the things they are trying to master (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010). Through humour a child finds a challenging activity funny and become motivated to spend more time at
the activity instead of giving up. Through humour children practice what they need to. By playing with an uncertain situation, humour allows re-consideration (Erickson & Feldstein, 2007).

This is apparent in the game of peek-a-boo. This is a time when the infant is learning object-permanence—that when an object is covered, it is still there and does not simply disappear. Without humour, an infant could find the sudden disappearance of a parent’s face a cause for concern, but by finding the disappearance and reappearance funny, the infant is motivated to perform the game over and over again, helping solidify this very important concept.

Similarly, toddlers delight in repeating actions and sounds they are in the process of mastering (Anderson, Cameron, Fox, & Cameron, 2010). They will repeat nonsense sounds endlessly, laughing at the funny noises they make. They will also play with their food, turning a very difficult problem for themselves (how to get food into their mouths) into a game. And even when they make mistakes feeding, some toddlers will pretend they did it on purpose—as a joke—making a mistake fun.

The development of joke-telling in children also displays this mastery effect. Young children find the structure of a joke funny all on its own—they don’t even need a punch line! (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010). When they tell a knock-knock joke, they are completely unconcerned about whether or not the joke makes any sense—as long as they get the “Knock-knock. Who’s there?” part right they’ll find it funny. (Knock knock. Who’s there? Bananas. Bananas who? Bananas and apples and when you eat them they taste good. Ha! Ha!) This is because, at this point, they find the structure of the joke to be challenging enough on its own. The content comes only after the structure has been mastered. It isn’t until around age 6 that
children find jokes with proper resolutions to be funnier than ones that simply follow a joke pattern with no resolution at all (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010).

Irony and sarcasm are among the most complex forms of humour and adolescents use these forms frequently, in part, because they are trying to master them. Ironic and sarcastic humour relies on an understanding of a particular incongruity—that is, being able to understand both the literal and intended meaning of a joke (Warnarskleverlaan, Oppenheime & Sherman, 1996). Just as with young children who master the form of the knock-knock just before the content, adolescents can use the form of irony before mastering the content and delivery, creating statements that many adults would find too obvious to qualify as ironic, but which they find extremely funny.

**Discovering and pushing boundaries.** Children often use humour to find boundaries and, once they’ve found these boundaries, to push them. By making a game out of pushing the limit a child might still get reprimanded but the punishment is likely to be less severe than if they challenged the rules in a serious way.

Even infants seem to enjoy violating boundaries and expectations. An infant might put a cloth in his mouth (instead of washing his hands with it) and then smile and laugh to see what his parents’ reaction is (Loizou, 2005). Older children use toilet humour to discover where the limits of “bad words” really are. And almost all children enjoy role reversal games, such as when they get to pretend to be a monster attacking an adult, because these games flip the standard order of things and put the child briefly in a position of power.

Adolescents also use humour to push and find boundaries. Some use offensive words humorously, often in violation of official adult codes. They also use humour to discuss sensitive topics that might be prohibited in the school—the more taboo the topic, the generally more
positive reaction they get from their peers (Sanford & Eder, 1984). It makes sense that adolescents would push boundaries the most as they are near to adulthood yet still subject to rules not of their own making.

Adolescents use humour to discover the limits in their own peer groups. They tell funny stories describing the social violations of other students and, by doing so, state their own views on where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour are while at the same time retaining the ability to retreat from this position if others disagree (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010). Adolescents use humour in this way to avoid embarrassment—sexual subjects, for example, are almost exclusively dealt with through humour in a group setting. One study of high school girls found that talk about menstruation was always talked about through humour in a group and never directly or in the serious mode (Sanford & Eder, 1984).

**Social bonding.** As mentioned earlier, humour can be considered a form of communication. Humorous communication is often used in social settings to handle difficult situations and to create and maintain social bonds and groups.

Infants use smiles and laughs to bond with their immediate members, especially their mothers, just a few months after they are born and soon expand on this by reacting to and instigating humour and laughter with their immediate family to create social and emotional bonds (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010).

Toddlers use humour to promote familial attachment, and enjoy sharing family in-jokes. With the expansion of the child’s social world beyond the immediate family the ability to use humour effectively becomes an important social tool, and children who use humour well have been found to have more friends than those who do not (Cameron et al., 2008).
In adolescents the ability to use and understand humour socially is an essential skill and is one of the most important contributors to a child’s status in a group (Klein & Kuiper, 2006). Adolescent groups are often based on shared humour and adolescents tend to become friends with those who share their sense of humour. The in-jokes these groups develop often become like a code or shorthand that signals group membership. Familiarity between adolescents is often demonstrated by the sometimes fierce joking they make with each other. So although adolescents often use irony and sarcasm amongst themselves, this does not necessarily mean they are being aggressive. They might actually be showing they are the best of friends (Anderson, Cameron, Fox, & Cameron, 2010).

What a Teacher Can Learn Through Student Humour

There are things of deadly earnest that can only be mentioned under the cover of a joke.

J.J. Procter (Procter, 1897)

Now you know how humour develops in children. “This is all well and good,” I hear you say (and you do have a lovely voice), “but is this of any use to me?” Well, it most definitely is. Understanding how and why students use humour can reveal many productive pedagogical paths. And because you asked so nicely I have decided to list a few of them below.

Humour can help children learn. Humour can help children learn. I’ll repeat that. Humour can help children learn. It is a misconception that learning is a serious activity. Some learning is. But there is a lot of learning that is best approached through humour and play. Challenging material (either cognitively or socially) can be learned very effectively through humour. Humour, like play, makes learning enjoyable—something the child is motivated to do. By finding the humour in a failed attempt instead of feeling defeated, a student can continue to
tackle a challenge she would otherwise abandon. Sounds of laughter and merriment are not signs of disengagement from learning; they are signs of engagement. (As long as they’re laughing at something related to the task at hand, of course, instead of just happening to notice that you put your cardigan on inside out.)

**Humour is developmentally dependent.** Children find different things funny at different ages and what these things are is directly related to what they find mentally, emotionally, and socially challenging. A child who delights in knock-knock jokes and funny word-play might very well find these jokes “lame” a few years later. Much of the humour used by children and adolescents—potty humour in younger kids, sex jokes in teenagers—might not be funny or acceptable to adults, but it is important to recognize that students can only respond to what they are developmentally prepared for. Some of this humour may be distracting in a classroom environment but if you find the right outlet it can actually encourage them to learn. This can be a hard decision to make. For example, some young kids love the Captain Underpants series because the humour in it pushes the limits of what is acceptable for their age, and this is a great motivation for them to read. Now, whether or not you think their parents will appreciate you engaging them in this manner is something you will have to figure out on your own. (Captain Underpants, by the way, features a mean school principal who has been hypnotized by two smart but rule-phobic students to believe he is a diaper-wearing superhero. What kid wouldn’t want to read that?)

**Humour is related to power.** Humour can be used by children of any age as a way of gaining a sense of power and control. The more rules you install and monitor the greater the social reward for a student to break them with humour. Dictators hate humour, and often kill humourists for daring to point out the ridiculous nature of their rules (Ziv, 2010). If you run your
class in a similar way, you might end up with similarly rebellious children trying to find real ways to undermine you.

Students make jokes about teachers for the same reason that workers make fun of the boss, or that teachers make fun of the school board. It is a way of shifting the balance of power, if only in the imagination. When there is no official outlet for complaints, and no chance of change through regular communication, humour becomes the only way to vent and to avoid feeling completely helpless.

**Students are trying to tell you something!** Students often use humour to try to tell you something without having to come right out and say it. Students make jokes about things that bother them in class, such as noise or smells or even the teacher themselves (Meeus & Mahieu, 2009). Humour is used to find boundaries, so by telling you something (that they’re not certain you’re going to like) with a joke they may feel a little safer. After all, no matter how understanding and open you are with the students you are still an authority figure.

There are two ways students might use humour to tell you something this way. If they feel comfortable using humour with you, they might make a humorous comment directly to you, or even make a joke about it to the whole class. If, on the other hand, you have not developed such a relationship, they’re more likely to make these jokes to their friends or classmates instead, which you might occasionally overhear. They might even decide to play a prank on you by putting something nasty in your coffee if they don’t think there’s any chance you’re going to listen to them (Meeus & Mahieu, 2009).

So listen to the jokes students are making. As the old saying goes, “Many a true word is spoken in jest.” And who knows, maybe you could even make things a little nicer for the
students by changing the things that bother them. You might also avoid having something nasty dropped into your coffee cup.
Part Three: Defining and Analyzing Humour

Defining and analyzing humor is a pastime of humorless people.

Robert Benchley

Analyzing humour gets a bad rap. When I was searching for quotations about humour I found many that were variations on the theme of “looking at humour kills humour so why would you ever do such a stupid thing.” Most of these quotations, it should be noted, were by humourists or comedians, which I find interesting because these are the very people who spend much of their time analyzing humour. A comedian will work and rework a joke until its right, and during (and even before) a show a comedian will try to “read” the crowd to figure out how to approach them, and to determine what jokes will work best and in what order. Professional humourists can be extremely technical in their craft and, like other professions, have a wide variety of jargon words—*ad-lib, call-back, beat, reveal, set-up, tag-line, throwaway*—all of which have very specific technical meanings. Why would humourists and comedians be against people analyzing humour when they do this themselves? I don’t know for sure, but I think it might be the same reason that magicians don’t like people knowing how they do their tricks—it kills the magic.

When magic becomes mundane it can be a bit of a downer. When we learn that Santa isn’t real, that politicians lie, and that magnets aren’t powered by elves, we feel sad for our loss of innocence. And humour can certainly appear magical. People often find themselves laughing
at something without any idea why. Finding the method behind the magic, however, can be very helpful in understanding humour—even if it does take some of the mystery out of it.

Humanity itself has become a lot less magical over the course of the last hundred years or so. We humans used to revel in our uniqueness, our own special magical powers that separated us from the lowly animals. At one time we considered ourselves to be the only beings with consciousness, with empathy, with emotions, that used tools—and that had a sense of humour. Of course animals have now been discovered to possess all these things, even humour. But admitting we are a part of the animal world, not separate from it, has its advantages. By looking at how humour evolved it is possible to get a better understanding of why it works the way it does.

The Origins of Humour

You can tell a lot about a person by meeting their family. And in humour, just like people, has a family. Humour’s closest relatives are play, smiling, and laughter. This family is so close, in fact, that it can be hard to know when one member stops and another begins.

Play. Like humour, play is a non-serious mode of interacting with others. Play is widespread across the animal world and almost all mammals engage in it. What exactly constitutes play behaviour is hard to define, although it has been described as behaviour that fits the following criteria (Burghardt, 2005):

- it does not contribute to current survival
- it is self-rewarding
- it differs from “serious” forms of behaviour
- it is performed repeatedly
- it occurs when the animal is not surrounded by immediate threats

If you look at this list, you might notice that these criteria could just as easily be describing humour. Humour is self-rewarding, is performed repeatedly, differs from serious mode of behaviour, occurs when not surrounded by immediate threats, and does not seem to contribute to current survival (unless, of course, you have to tell a joke to save your life). The similarities between humour and play are quite striking and some have argued that humour developed out of play and is therefore a form of play.

Play, like humour, is somewhat mysterious. Why would animals expend so much time and energy doing something that seems so trivial? There have been many suggestions. Perhaps play helps animals enhance skills that can be used for life? Or maybe it helps the animal to obtain useful information about the environment and group members? Or maybe it can help an animal to establish dominance or to reduce tension around feeding or to turn a stranger into someone familiar (Held & Špinka, 2011)? You might notice that, once again, these are things that can be equally applied to humour.

Another similarity between humour and play is that in both behaviours the initiator often gives cues to let the recipient know what’s happening. When an animal is playing, it is both attacking and not attacking at the same time. It is being aggressive, but in a non-serious, pretend way. To make these intentions clear many animals put on a “play face.” This is a special facial expression that lets the other animal know that the attack is only in fun and therefore to not attack back with the intent to injure or kill (Weisfeld, 2006). Similarly, in humans, facial cues or a special vocal tone may be used when making a joke about something so that the receiver of the humour does not take the joke as a personal attack. We humans, however, have taken the idea of the “play face” one step beyond what the animals have. We digitally insert play faces in digital
communication in the form of emoticons, having discovered that adding a winking smiley face to a sarcastic Facebook post can prevent a world of trouble and misinterpretation.

**Laughter and smiling.** Laughter and smiling are often considered a sign that something humorous has happened and human smiles may have their roots in the “play face” used by ancestral primates to initiate play (Todt, 2005). Laughter is smiling’s auditory relative and it may have developed to communicate a state of play even when the laughers face could not be seen (Caron, 2002).

An important distinction between laughter and smiling is in their range and control. A smile can be given to one or a few (either obviously or on the sly), but laughter announces itself to all around. Laughter is a primitive form of broadcasting: a social alarm that lets people know that there is something unusual going on. The primarily social nature laughter is demonstrated by it being 30 times more frequent in social situations as compared with solitary situations (Provine, 2000).

Laughter has developed into a powerful social tool. It can act as a vocal display of compliance or solidarity with a more socially dominant group member, it can bring a group together, and it can be used to punish or alienate someone not wanted by the group (Provine, 2000). The importance of laughter in humans is evidenced by its universality—all people laugh, it is an innate genetic trait.

So is laughter, at least, unique to humans? No. (Unless you use a very limited definition of laughter, that is). Rapid vocal exhalations, similar in at least some ways to laughter in humans, have been found in many animals including primates, dogs, and even rats (Bering, Jesse, 2012), suggesting that laughter or laughers-like behaviour serves an important function in socially oriented mammals. But although all these animals exhibit something that could be considered
laughter, they do not all exhibit something that could be considered humour. This suggests that although laughter and humour are related in humans, they are certainly not the same. This idea is supported by the fact that, in human conversation, only 10-15 percent of laughter is used to signal a response to humour (Provine, 2000). Playfulness, being in a group, and positive emotional tone and social setting, seem to be the main determiners of laughter. Laughter is certainly an indicator of humour, but the existence of laughter does not equate directly to humour; and it is also possible to find something humorous without laughing, especially in a non-social setting.

That laughter has developed in humans from older origins is suggested by studies of how our primate relatives laugh. One study (Todt, 2005) demonstrated this by tickling orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos and comparing their laughter to laughter in humans. (This is one scientific study I would very much have liked to been a part of.) Their first conclusion was that primates did, indeed, laugh. They then analysed the vocal characteristics of the different laughs and constructed an evolutionary tree. From this they hypothesised that laughing behaviour went back at least 10 to 16 million years to the common ancestor of humans and great apes. Laughter has been with us a long time.

**Humour in Primates.** Humour seems to have arisen out of play and in conjunction with laughter and smiling. So does humour exist in animals? Why, yes, it does—although so far it has only been clearly observed in our primate relations. That primates use humour should not be a surprise. They demonstrate all the humour-related behaviours: they engage in play, they have a “play face” that signals non-serious behaviour, and they exhibit a laughing response very similar to our own when tickled (Gamble, 2001). And, of course, it is unlikely that humour appeared in
humans fully formed—we should expect to see the antecedents of our sense of humour in our closest relatives.

There is evidence of wild apes using humour in games of chase, where they seem to interact with each other with what might be considered humorous intent. And many groups of wild gorillas have what has been called a “prankster” member who seems to delight in stirring things up in the group. It has been speculated that gorillas might use humour to maintain some sort of social structure peacefully, especially during periods of change, but this data is pretty thin (Gamble, 2001).

Apes in captivity, however, have shown behaviour that is more clearly humorous. The signing chimp “Koko” can joke, understand multiple meanings, and play practical jokes—once tying her trainer’s shoelaces together and then signing, “Chase” (Gamble, 2001). Captive primates appear to enjoy mislabelling objects and changing signs on purpose in a playful way. Chance, a chimpanzee living in a sanctuary, also demonstrated what most would consider humour. She liked to play catch with a tennis ball, but instead of throwing the ball to her human helper would throw it as far away as possible and then laugh as he went to retrieve it (Westoll, 2012).

**Okay Then, What is Humour?**

Humor is the instinct for taking pain playfully.

Max Eastman (Eastman, 1922)

You may have noticed that we are halfway through this Handbook of Humour and I have so far avoided talking about what humour actually is. Instead I have shown how it develops through childhood, its evolutionary origins, and I have given many examples of how to use
humour in teaching. The reason behind this avoidance is simple. I wanted you to read the book. Yes, you can define and analyse humour, but it is, sadly, a lot less fun than using it.

But I cannot put it off for any longer. Fortunately, I am not the first person to attempt to analyze humour and there are numerous theories of humour in a wide variety of disciplines—psychology, anthropology, sociology, aesthetics—just to mention a few. So to help you develop an understanding of what humour is all about, I give you the cavalcade of humour theories!

The Cavalcade of Humour Theories.

- **Arousal theory:** Humour is largely determined by the level of emotional arousal (Martin, 2007).

- **Schema theory:** Schemas are groupings of ideas or expectations that we develop in our minds about a particular thing or situation—a mental shorthand that allows us to predict how things usually are (Martin 2007). Humour is created when a schema is either interrupted, or when multiple schemas are used to evaluate a particular situation. When a schema is activated, but is then proved false, the brain must find another schema that fits instead. For example, in the joke—My dog has no nose. *How does it smell?* Awful.—the initially schema for the word *smell* is the as the sense of smell, the ability to smell something. When this is proved incorrect, a different schema for *smell*, that of the stinky dog, is activated. Humour is thusly created.

- **Joking relationships:** Relationships—based on jokes, teasing, and ridicule—that exist between individuals in a specific social structure that help maintain social
stability, establish group identity, and separate the members of the group from outsiders who will not understand the humour (Apte, 1985).

- *Incongruity theory*- Humour arises from unexpected or unlikely events (Koestler, 1984).

- *Humorous and serious modes of communication*: There are two basic modes of communication: serious and humorous. The serious mode is logical and consistent and allows only one interpretation. In the humorous mode multiple interpretations can be accepted simultaneously (Mulkay, 1988).

- *Psychoanalytic theory*: Laughter is used to release excess nervous energy and humour allows us to enjoy pleasure from our repressed sexual and aggressive impulses (Martin, 2007).

- *Superiority/Disparagement theory*: Humour is based on aggression and power. (Gruner, 1997).

- *Reversal theory*: Humour relies on an incongruity where a reversal of roles or characteristics occurs. (Martin, 2007).

Well, I sure hope that cleared things up for you (and, just so you know, these are just a few of the many theories out there).

Okay, maybe it didn’t. It probably just annoyed you. To make it up for you I will now give you a complete and comprehensive definition of humour

**The Definition of Humour.**

Humour is what people define as humorous.

Holy tautology Batman! (Tautology is another word I have wanted to use for a long time.)
I give you this unsatisfactory definition because I have been unable to find a single, comprehensive definition of what constitutes humour, and I think my definition does a good job of summing up many of the definitions I’ve seen. I do not mean to belittle the work of others in this regard because I think the job of coming up with a universal theory of humour is a difficult one. There is a simple reason for this—a universal definition of humour does not exist.

Humour is not gravity. It is not a mathematical equation. It is a messy grouping of thoughts and behaviours whose definition varies from researcher to researcher and culture to culture and person to person. It overlaps and interacts with laughter, cognitive processes, and social structures. To come up with a single definition of humour you would first have to make every person agree on what the word “humour” means. And I don’t think this is any more possible then getting everyone to agree on a single definition of “art”. Many people have claimed to do just that, but, at the end of the day, they have simply come up with their definition, not the definition. And their definition of art often ends up being similar to my definition of humour: Art is what I define as art.

So do we just throw up our arms and walk away? No! It might not be possible to define humour, but it can be described. Simply by looking through the various theories that I listed above you can start to recognize some consistent themes. One of the most common re-occurring elements in humour theory seems to be the presence of some sort of tension or comparison between two separate things or states (the serious and non-serious states for example) or between two schemas, or between those who are in on the joke and who are not. In other words, to quote Sesame Street, “One of these things is not like the other. One of these things just doesn’t belong.”
One word for this is incongruity—the recognition that something you expected to be one way is actually not that way at all. It is not, however, always talked about as incongruity, some theories focus on the “surprise” element—how humour happens when you think things are one way and then SURPRISE! something else suddenly happens. Other theories focus on schemas—which are habits of thought, ways that we expect certain things to unfold—and how when two schemas you possess are shown to be incompatible that is when humour arises. Regardless of the exact conception, some form of jarring difference seems apparent in almost all humour including physical humour (an unexpected fall), irony (the statement made being incongruous with its actual meaning) and puns (one of the definitions of the word being incongruous with how it is being used).

So that sounds like a theory. Humour is an incongruous situation. Only, incongruity is not enough on its own to make something funny. For example, if you came home and found a dead body on your doorstep you probably would not find it immediately humorous, even though it is certainly incongruous as to what you expected to be on your doorstep. For something to be funny you first need to feel that it is funny. This feeling of humour is sometimes called “mirth.” Finding that dead body on your doorstep would probably elicit dread instead. And it is only very particular kinds of incongruity in very particular situations that mirth seems to be created.

How do we find out how this works? Well, part of the answer can be found in the most unlikely place.

INSIDE THE HUMAN BRAIN!

The Brain: What the Heck is Happening in There?

The comic is the perception of the opposite; humor is the feeling of it.

Eco, Umberto (Eco, 1986)
Research has often focused on two separate parts of humour, how does someone think something is funny, and how does someone feel something is funny. This division highlights the difficulty in defining humour. Is humour the feeling of mirth? Or is humour knowing that something is funny? Or do you need both?

The division of humour between feeling and thinking is not an artificial one. Neurological research has shown that these two parts are actually two different brain systems, the cognitive (thinking) and the affective (feeling), each of which activates different brain structures and neural networks in separate ways (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010). The one thing that they have in common is that both act in networks that work broadly across the brain interacting with many areas and functions. The processing of humour is not localized, there is no single “humour centre.” There is not even a “funny lobe.”

The thinking (or cognitive) process lets people know that something is funny. Some form of incongruity is almost always involved in humour but the type of incongruity is very important as each type of incongruity has its own separate network. There is not one cognitive network—there are many (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010). General incongruity, for example, relates to the bilateral temporal lobe network, while puns and riddles activate the speech production regions of the frontal lobe (still no funny lobe). In other words, there is no one area that is activated whenever you know that something is funny. Different areas are activated dependent of the type of humour you are processing. This helps explain the peculiarity of humour, how certain people and certain cultures might react strongly to one kind of humour, but not at all to another.

The affective process lets people feel that something is funny. In sharp contrast to the cognitive system, the affective system in humour always activates in the same way regardless of
kind of humour it’s responding to (Goel & Dolan, 2001). No matter what you are finding funny—a pun, a sarcastic comment, someone falling down, an awkward social moment—the affective system responds in the same way. The affective system accesses the medial ventral prefrontal cortex, a region involved in reward processing, and this responsible for the feeling of “mirth” that occurs with humour. The effects of such mirth are stimulation, but the effects of mirth on the body are not unique to it, and are similar to the heightened feelings of arousal caused by play and discovery (Fry, 2002).

For a person to find something humorous requires two things: an incongruity and an activation of the feeling of mirth (Goel & Dolan, 2001). The brain must recognize the humorous incongruity and then physically react to it. These two processes use very different parts of the brain. The cognitive process uses the more developmentally recent prefrontal cortex and the frontal cortex, while the affective system uses the older regions of the brain such as the hippocampus and the limbic system, which are related to basic survival functions (Fry, 2002). In other words the parts of the brain used when we think something is funny is quite recent, while the parts of the brain used when we feel something is funny are much older.

It is possible to use the cognitive system without activating the affective system. Professional comedians (who have highly developed cognitive understanding of humour) can watch another comedian’s routine in a state of professional interest (in the serious and not playful mode) and analytically point out what is funny and why, without showing signs of mirth. They are thinking about humour, not feeling it. Similarly, it is possible to activate the affective system without using a cognitive trigger. In one case direct brain stimulation caused a patient to feel mirth and smile with mild electrical stimulation and, with greater stimulation, made the patient laughed out loud. These feelings of mirth were accompanied by the patient finding the
situation “funny” even though the environment did not change: “You guys are just so funny… standing around” (Fried, Wilson, MacDonald & Behnke, 1998, p. 650). This suggests that when someone feels “mirth” this can cause the cognitive system to try to find a reason why—even if there is no reason.

The cognitive and affective systems reinforce each other. If a person thinks something is funny, an affective feeling of mirth is created. If someone is feeling mirth, then their cognitive processes are more likely to find new incongruities humorous. Comedians recognize this when they are “warming up the audience.” When the affective system is activated, people are more likely to see things in the humorous state. This suggests that it might not be a good idea to use a lot of humour and then expect the students to immediately do a serious task. They have been primed to find things funny and it might take a while for them to come out of it. It also helps explain the contagious nature of humour, how it can reinforce itself in a group until the original reason for the humour is long gone, and everyone is finding things funny because everyone else is finding things funny.

**Fight, Flight, or Funny?**

So that’s what’s going on in the brain, but I still haven’t explained why some incongruities set off the cognitive triggers for mirth while others don’t. One way to find an explanation for why we find certain things humorous is by looking back at why humour might have developed in the first place. Throughout this handbook I’ve shown that humour is used to find boundaries and to navigate situations where the facts are not known. These are just the sorts of behaviours that might have originally developed as an option to the (rather limiting) fight or flight reaction.
I’ll explain. Way back in time our ancestors would have encountered situations where something unexpected had occurred (incongruity) but where there was no obvious threat. Humour could have been used to test the situation through play, and if the situation was deemed “safe” this could have been communicated to others through smiles and laughter. This role of humour, to investigate something that “isn’t quite right” is reflected in the two meanings of the word funny: both funny “ha-ha” and funny “peculiar.” When we say something is funny we can mean one of these, or both. This twin (actually conjoined twin) definition is apparent in many languages—Spanish, French, Greek, Chinese, Russian—suggesting that the concept of “funny,” as both something that is humorous and also something that is a little off, is similar across many cultures (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams Jr., 2011).

This helps explain how humour often involves two opposite forces simultaneously—how humour can involve liking and disliking something at the same time. Tense, but ambiguous, situations are a prime source of humour, especially in social encounters when fighting or fleeing might be presumptuous responses, and humour has often been noted as a sign of relief when a dangerous situation is deemed safe. Finding a bear in your cave would not be funny. Finding what you thought was a bear but that was actually just your old caveperson outfit would be funny. This is because the jacket isn’t about to kill you, but, for a second, you thought that it might.

The reason you feel mirth in this situation, is that your decision to neither fight nor flee is a positive one. You saved yourself a lot of unnecessary energy expenditure and your brain is rewarding a behaviour that encourages survival. This positive feeling is no different than the moods associated with eating, love, sex, and play. As indicated earlier the reward centres of the
brain are developmentally older than the cognitive centres, and the cognitive triggers of humour have adapted to take advantage of a system that was already in place.

Okay, I am now through defining and analyzing humour. Don’t worry this was all done for a reason. I think this understanding of humour at a basic level is vitally important to grasp what I believe to be the most important concept of humour, “The Line.”

The Line

"What may seem depressing or even tragic to one person may seem like an absolute scream to another person, especially if he has had between four and seven beers."

Dave Barry (Barry, 1994)

Imagine that you are looking out your window on a cold winter’s night (and that you live in a place that has cold winters) and you see a young guy strutting down the street. His hair is slicked back, he’s wearing clothes that are fashionable but completely impractical for the weather, and it is obvious that he thinks he is very cool. A young woman walks up coming the other way on the sidewalk. The young man gives her a smile and a wink and is about to say something to her when he slips on the ice and falls to the ground.

What would you do? Well, many people would find this funny and laugh.

You keep on looking out the window; you see a small stream of blood flowing from his head. Is this still funny? Most people would stop laughing now. You might even feel bad for laughing in the first place.

Now the ambulance comes and his inert body is placed on a stretcher and put inside. An older lady, perhaps his mother, runs up crying.
Still laughing?

What has happened here? Why was something so obviously funny before, now no longer funny at all? The point of all of this is to show you that it is not the act of falling down that is funny, it is the context. When the young man’s head started to bleed, the situation had crossed the line.

“The line” and why it determines what is funny, goes back to the purpose of humour. The closer you are to the line, the closer you are to turning “funny peculiar” into “funny ha-ha”. Humour is found at the boundaries, but these boundaries are completely contextual and change from person to person, from culture to culture, from moment to moment. A joke that might be too offensive for one audience, might also too tame for another.

When a system or authority uses the term “crossing the line” they are imposing a line that is unresponsive to contextual changes. They are drawing a firm and permanent line. But humour obeys no such line. If you were an adolescent hanging out with your friends and used only humour as sanctioned by the school board it is unlikely that your friends would find you very funny. (The same goes for the humour used in the teacher’s lounge.) The humour students use amongst themselves often moves the line further down, just as it does in almost any personal relationship.

The reason the line gets pushed back in close relationships is that the individuals are familiar with each other and are comfortable knowing that their jokes are unlikely to be misinterpreted as attacks. To get a really big laugh from a close friend you might have to say something that you’d get punched in the face for if you said it to a stranger.

So be careful. When you tell a student that a joke they made “isn’t funny” you are closing your conversation with them. Sure, in all likelihood you have just caught them saying something
inappropriate and offensive, but their purpose behind doing so might have been completely innocent. It is quite possible that they were talking to their friend the way they do when they’re not at school. It is important to let them know why their humour would not be considered funny by others and might even be considered offensive. It is important to let them know how they have crossed the line.

In your classroom, you set the parameters of what is acceptable and what is not. To talk to students about the line you can simply draw a line on the board. You can tell them you’re talking about humour and this is the line. They should get it already. Then you can ask where you would put the line if you were making a joke at a church picnic. The line would be pulled back. You can then ask, where would the line be for a comedian at a comedy club at 1:00 am in the morning, the line would move to the far end. You could then ask where would you put the line when you’re talking to your best friend. Where would it be with someone you just met? Where would it be for a teacher who has to be ready for the principal to come in at any time? That is around where you might want to draw the line for your class.

By understanding the line, you let the students know that you know the difference between something being inappropriate and something being funny. If you pretend inappropriate things are never funny they will think you have no sense of humour—inappropriate humour is often very funny. This is why the fart joke will never die. Instead use these moments to talk to the students about how other people might not view the world or their “funny” statements the same way. That other people and situations have a different line. You might just make them a little more socially aware.
Part Four: The Trouble with Humour

The comic and the tragic lie inseparably close, like light and shadow.

Socrates (Froude, 1885)

I’ve spent most of this handbook talking about the good things humour can do. How you can use it to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom, to help students retain more knowledge, and learn about your students through the humour they use. And while humour can be a wonderful thing, it is not, in itself, either positive or negative. It can build up and tear down, bond or shun, enlighten or deny. Depending on how you use humour and others use it on you, humour can make you feel great or terrible. Humour can be helpful, but it can also cause a lot of trouble.

Schools are difficult places for children to navigate. Students are brought together in an institution with a strict formal hierarchy (School Board > School Administration > Teachers > Students) and a sometimes equally strict, but informal, hierarchy amongst students (including such factors as grade level, groups, interests, and socio-economic background), and have to figure out how to survive. As humour is often used in difficult and confusing situations and to give a feeling of power to the powerless, it shouldn’t be surprising that students use it so frequently in schools—being in a school can certainly result in a student feeling confused and powerless. With so much humour being used, and with “the line” of acceptability moving so frequently, people are bound to get hurt.
Some of this is due to the nature of humour. Because things tend to be funnier the closer they are to the line, there is always the temptation to push things as far as possible in order to get the biggest laugh—and sometimes this turns out to be too far. This sort of error can be the result of a lack of experience with using humour, or a poorly made assumption on where the ever-shifting line happened to be at that particular place and time. But humour doesn’t just hurt people mistakenly; it is also used to hurt on purpose. Humour can be an effective tool for someone who wants to punish, humiliate, or maintain power over someone else.

Students are not the only ones who hurt others with humour, teachers often do the same. A teacher who uses sarcastic humour to bond with his students can quite easily go a bit too far and end up accidentally insulting or humiliating a student instead. And, of course, teachers who use humour as a weapon against their students can be the very worst kind of bully.

**Out of Bounds**

Sometime a student uses humour that is clearly over the established boundaries. If you are running a class and you have told them that there will be no humour that demeans another student and then a student makes a joke calling someone an idiot, you have a clear case of someone going over the line. It could be that the student forgot the rule, accidently stepped over it, stepped over it to get attention, or stepped over it to hurt someone. Hopefully you will know the student well enough to know what the most likely reason was.

Your response should be based on why the student crossed the line. If it was an honest mistake, review why you’ve set the boundaries where they are, remind the students that these are the rules for the classroom, not the universe (but that they would do well to keep in mind why you have set them up). If it was an attempt to get attention, but you do not feel like it was meant
as a jab against you or someone else in the class, you might want to have a talk with that student, reminding him or her of why you’ve set these rules up and what the consequences are. If you feel the student made the joke in a purposefully aggressive and hurtful way, then you need to consider exactly what to do, and whether to involve a higher level of administration, especially if it is part of bullying.

Out of Context

The previous example gives the impression that controlling humour is an easy thing to do. Just review the boundaries and enforce them, preferably through education. But humour is contextual and when a humorous event is taken out of its original context and placed in another it can be judged in a more serious light and change from something viewed as edgy but fun to something viewed offensive and even dangerous. In essence, a joke that was considered to be just on the line in one context is now viewed as way over the line in another. To illustrate this problem I will use a couple of real world examples.

A video gets the thumbs down. In 2011, a grade 12 student posted several animated videos he had made for a class of his on YouTube (McKnight, 2011). The student was “trying to be funny” in a style similar to South Park or The Family Guy and the videos focussed on the absurdity of school assignments, featured amateurish stick figures, and made references to drug use and rape. One character (the cartoon version of the student) even promised to “kill all black people” (Christie, 2011). The student received good grades for these assignments, which were played in class, demonstrating that they were deemed acceptable by his teacher. However, when the student posted these videos on the internet, administrators at the school board asked him to remove them due to their “offensive” nature. When the student refused, he was suspended and banned from the prom. The school board also asked the police to investigate. (The police viewed
the videos and declined to go further.) The fallout from this situation was that many of the students found the treatment of this student to be unjust and created a petition and protested to have him pardoned.

It is easy to understand the anger of the students. After all, the student had had every reason to believe that his videos were appropriate given his grades and the encouragement of his teacher who even did a voice cameo in one of the videos (Christie, 2011). But by posting the videos, the student had taken them out of a classroom environment where his sense of humour was known, to a place where each viewer would view the video with their own particular definition of what was acceptable humour. The school board administration viewed the videos like airport security personnel hearing bomb joke. For the school board any racial comments were received in the serious mode only, and so if a student had a character say “kill all blacks” that is exactly how the school board took it. For the school board administrators, ironic satire did not exist.

Of course, the student could have just taken the video down until he was done high school, which was only a few months away, but he seemed to enjoy the attention and extra views the controversy had brought him and his videos. In the end the student missed the prom, but the teacher was not formerly punished, nor did any of the administrators mention a need for clarifying their humour policy in the schools. The irony, of course, is by telling the student to remove the videos many more people heard about them and watched them.

A band gets banned. The previous example shows what can happen when humour is deemed appropriate in a classroom but not at the official level. A similar problem can arise when a sub-group in an educational institution develops their own joking culture. A joking culture is a relationship within a group that, over time, comes to define the group to its members and
eventually serve to identify the group itself (Fine & De Soucey, 2005). An important characteristic of joking cultures is that humorous material becomes historicized with jokes and stories becoming a part of the group’s traditions and rituals. It is this shared history of humour that separates a joking culture from the humour of a newly-formed group. Over the top and offensive humour are often used in joking cultures. One sociologist describes why as follows:

The art of making fun without raising anger, by means of ritual mockery or insults which are neutralized by their very excess and which, presupposing a great familiarity, both in the knowledge they use and the freedom with which they use it, are in fact tokens of affection, ways of building up while seeming to run down, of accepting while seeming to condemn—although they may also be used to test out those who show signs of stand-offishness. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 183)

The other words, the line gets pushed way back in these groups.

In November, 2011, a university marching band was suspended after controversial material was brought to university administrators in the form of pamphlets and a songbook (Fernandez-Blance, 2011). The pamphlets contained sexually aggressive phrases and the songbook contained songs that were viewed by university administrators as offensive and degrading to women. The importance of this humour to the band is evident by the fact that the band members used it despite knowing that other members of the university community would find it offensive. Leaders of the band had told members to be careful to ensure that the pamphlets and songbooks did not get into the hands of non-band people.

The sexist nature of the humour is interesting given that the band was half female, and that women are well-represented in the structure of the organization. One possible explanation for the existence of sexist material is that it was part of the group’s historicized humour. These
were songs that, for the most part, were created in a time of different social norms. These songs became forgotten in the broader context of the university but survived as part of the cultural history of the band. When the songs resurfaced, they were deemed highly offensive and potentially harmful by a large portion of the university community.

Joking cultures develop in almost all groups of any duration (Fine & De Soucey, 2005) who consider themselves different so school clubs and teams are a likely place to find them. Because these cultures often use offensive humour as part of their identity, students who are a part of a joking culture can be highly motivated to use inappropriate humour. Within the group this humour is considered acceptable, possibly even demanded as membership, but when brought to light in a different context, where the sub-culture’s rules are overridden by the official rules, they are found to be clearly unacceptable.

Left Out

Humour plays an important role in forming groups but it can also play an important role in isolating others. Humour has often been associated with power and aggression—in fact the superiority/disparagement theory of humour considers power and aggression to be the basis of all humour (Gruner, 1997). It is, however, undeniable that humour is often used to benefit one person or group at the expense of another. This is particularly apparent in the jokes and taunts that accompany bullying.

Bullying. Bullying is a problem in schools but what is seldom talked about it the very large role humour plays in bullying. Because humour allows you to say something but at the same time deny it, it is a tool that bullies cannot resist. Humour gives bullies an excuse.

Bullying is not a simple thing and it can happen in many ways. Some bullies are very direct with their bullying. These bullies are easily identifiable, and use humour to directly gain
power of their target through insults or teasing. Because of the simple nature of these interactions a direct bully is usually easy to spot (Klein & Kuiper, 2006).

It is much harder to catch bullies who use more socially sophisticated forms of aggressive behaviour. Indirect bullies use social control to harass and ostracize other children from the group. Research has indicated that indirect bullies perceive their social worlds quite accurately, are often very skillful in social interactions, and are very effective manipulators of peer groups (Klein & Kuiper, 2006). Humour is one of their primary weapons. They can create groups that use humour so that only members of the group understand it, thereby isolating others outside of it (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010). If a member of the group does something they do not approve of, they can humiliate them through humour. They can also use humour to spread rumours about other students both inside and outside of the group, and start jokes about them, or create nicknames that stick to them. Of course, the indirect bully can defend all of this as “just a joke.”

**Missing the joke.**

In recent years, there have been great efforts to integrate children with high functioning autism into regular classrooms. These are children who have difficulty in recognizing social cues and who process and understand the world differently than other children. Their difficulty in recognizing social cues causes a particular problem when interacting with other children through humour (Reddy et al., 2002).

Children with high-functioning autism react to, and engage in, humour differently from an early age. They seldom engage in clowning, have difficulty in responding to and understanding teasing, show little interest in social laughter, and often laugh at private or
unshared content. They enjoy humour, but the humour they create and respond to is of a cognitive, instead of social nature (Reddy et al., 2002).

This inability to understand and use social humour puts them at a greater risk of being left out of social groups. Because they either do not understand or do not feel drawn to practice social humour, they are at risk of being unable to develop closer, more intimate, relationships with other children—something that humour is very good at doing. The complexity of humour in adolescence—sarcasm and irony in social situations—can be especially hard for them, and lead to serious social implications.

**Teacher Humour: No Dark Sarcasm in the Classroom?**

Of course, it’s not just students who get into trouble through humour: teachers are also at risk. For example, I have heard many people say that teachers should not use sarcasm in the classroom, yet almost every teacher I have ever had or have seen has tossed off at least the occasional sarcastic remark. Why would they do this when it seems so risky?

Part of the problem is the word “sarcasm” itself. The old definition of sarcasm is of a cutting remark, humour that is meant to hurt. But sarcasm, in its more current usage, has come to mean the use of irony to mock something. When someone says, “Oh, I was being sarcastic” what they usually mean is “oh, I was being mockingly ironic.” Sarcasm, by this definition, covers everything from public ridicule (to demean someone else), to playful back-and-forth mocking (to enhance bonding), to self-sarcasm (in which the speaker is his own target). Sarcasm is not always used to hurt but also to simply make fun of something or someone, albeit with a point.

I am not alone in my observation that teachers use sarcasm frequently. Studies have shown that many teachers use aggressive humour in some way and that many teachers make
these comments not just to the class as a whole but also to particular members of the class (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). One study of high school teachers found that ten percent of the self-reported instances of humour from teachers involved some form of sarcasm, teasing or insults (Neulip, 1991).

The main case against sarcasm seems to be that teachers that bully use sarcasm, and bullying is bad, therefore sarcasm is bad: QED. This flawed logic and the black and white thinking it engenders is unnecessarily limiting: sarcasm is simply a tool, and it can be used positively to motivate students as well. Yes, some teachers use sarcasm to shame their students into compliance, but others use it to create a playful atmosphere.

What is interesting is that there is evidence that students don’t mind sarcasm as long as it is well-intentioned, and some even prefer this way of communicating (Fovet, 2009). Sarcasm can actually reduce the negative impact of giving criticism to a student. As shown earlier in this handbook, humour can ease the pain of feedback. Instead of bluntly stating a criticism (“You’re late again, that is unacceptable.”) a sarcastic statement (“Oh, I see you’re still on Daylight Savings time.”) can allow a student to “save face” by giving them the opportunity to see the humour in the situation while, at the same time, getting the message.

Social bonds can also be enhanced through sarcasm. Many high school students use sarcasm as one of their major modes of communication and the ability to talk to them in a style they prefer to use can help build a stronger relationship. If you don’t use a bit of sarcasm once in a while, you will literally not be speaking their language.

But there is real danger in using sarcasm. It can act as a scalpel, making just the right cut for a beneficial operation, or it can be a chainsaw leaving nothing but a bloody mess and a lot of screaming. Because the teacher is saying one thing and meaning another effective sarcasm
depends on the student’s ability to decode the teacher’s meaning successfully. So, even with the best of intentions, the teacher might say something that the student finds insulting or demeaning. This can even happen with a student who generally responds well to humour if he or she is in a bad mood. Sarcasm is also more effective with older students as the ability to understand sarcasm and irony are developmentally dependent. And then there is the unmistakable fact that many people, even teachers, just aren’t as funny as they think they are, and the sarcastic comments they make in an attempt to gain immediacy are either unintentionally hurtful or simply not funny.

Here are couple of real life stories to show you what NOT to do when using humour as a teacher.

The cardtastrophe. A Grade 3 student came home at the end of the year with a card in her backpack. Her mother took it out and read it. It was from her daughter’s teacher and printed on the top of the card it said "You're tops" but in handwritten letters below it read "The Catastrophe Award—given to the one student with the most excuses for not having their homework done.” The daughter also told her mother that it had been given to her in front of the class. The mother did not think this was funny and called both the school board and the media. It soon became a national story. The teacher, for her part, said that she meant it as a joke.

Was it?

It’s impossible to tell what really motivated the teacher to do this, but let’s take her at her word and assume she meant it as a joke. There are many reasons why it was a very bad joke. The first is that she used a form of humour, ironic-sarcasm, that an eight-year-old child would be developmentally ill-equipped to handle (Glenwright, & Pexman, 2010). At eight years old, a child is just starting to understand the basic forms of irony, so there is a large chance that she will
miss the humour and take the statement literally—especially from an authority figure such as a teacher. Even if the student got the joke, it is highly unlikely that all the other students in the class would as well. Now, let’s assume that the entire class was in on the joke and understood it was just a funny way of getting a point across; even then it was a bad idea. As soon as the card was sent home it was removed from the culture of humour in the classroom and interpreted as a serious statement by the student’s mother.

Now, these are some pretty big assumptions. My personal take on this story is that the teacher might have been attempting to use sarcasm to get a point across in a funny way but didn’t understand that this was a highly inappropriate way of dealing with a child in Grade 3. It is also possible that the teacher was simply a bully who used humour to humiliate students to keep them in line. Without being able to see the class in action it is impossible to tell which interpretation is closer to the truth.

**Leaving a bad taste in the mouth.** A class canoe trip in Manitoba came to an abrupt end after two Grade 8 students were tricked into chewing on moose droppings. The culprit? A parent chaperone who told the students the droppings were chocolate-covered almonds while the principal, the school counselor, and a teacher watched on and laughed. After the incident one student was pulled from the school by his parents who said that the trust between staff and students has been broken. The three staff members from the school were later disciplined for not stopping the joke. A question springs to mind—what the hell were they thinking?

This seems to be a case of humour-bonding gone bad. The adults were showing each other how funny they could be, and one way to do this is to share in outrageous humour by pushing back the line. An additional factor was that they were away from the school so the contextual bounds that would normally have been in place were no longer present (a case of
“Whatever happens on canoe trip, stays on canoe trip”). What is most troubling about this episode is the large power differential of those involved. This was not a case of students in a close-knit joking culture playing pranks on each other to demonstrate their bonds but of adults and authority figures tricking students. The adults found the incongruity of students eating what they thought was chocolate (but was actually poo) to be funny, but the student victims did not. (This is a very good example of why incongruity alone is not enough to make something funny). It is hard to tell from the details if this event involved other students watching at the same time and whether or not the student-victims were possibly considered to be outside of the popular group of students. But it seems like the group was defining themselves through humour by making a joke at someone else’s expense.

**How to Handle Humour**

A joke is a very serious thing.

*Winston Churchill*

So, how do you limit these sorts of things? How do you even know if humour is being used to bully or to bond? A tempting solution would be to ban any humour that could be interpreted as offensive. You could quite easily make all jokes with sexist or racist sounding content unacceptable on school property. Or you could go further and eliminate all ironic or sarcastic humour as these are often considered to be aggressive in nature.

But an understanding of developmental aspects of humour quickly demonstrates that this is an inappropriate response. First, it would be impossible to stop adolescents from engaging in irony and sarcasm simply because, developmentally, they are compelled to engage in it. More importantly, by becoming fixated on the potential harmful effects of sarcasm and irony the
benefits of these forms of humour can be overlooked. Several studies into how adolescents use sarcasm and irony frequently have found that sarcasm is rarely used negatively, but is often used to affiliate, to limit aggressiveness in conversations, and to avoid embarrassment (Anderson, Cameron, Fox, & Cameron., 2010).

Maybe, at the very least, you could ban teasing, since teasing is a part of bullying. But here you run into a problem: teasing and bullying are not the same thing. Bullying often involves teasing, but teasing can exist outside of bullying and teasing can be used for many positive things.

To be sure, some teasing is designed with the sole purpose of hurting, humiliating, or harassing the target of the tease. But often individuals tease to flirt, socialize, play, enhance social bonds, teach entertain (themselves, the target, or an audience), or to express affiliation, affection, or even love. (Gordon, Kruger, & Kuban, 2006)

**Intention.** The key to humour is intention. In positive humour the target of the humour is invited to play, but in humour used as part of bullying the target is not. Simple enough, we should simply discipline those students who tease with the intent to bully and ignore the rest. Unfortunately this is very difficult to do as we cannot see others intentions, we can only see their actions and infer their intentions. Even worse, research has demonstrated that human beings are highly inaccurate at assessing the motivation of others (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). This is not just a problem for teachers and administrators, students can also misinterpret the intentions of a tease due to a lack of awareness of the motives of the teaser. This can be especially problematic with students with exceptionalities such as Asperger’s syndrome, as their difficulty in recognizing social cues makes it difficult for them to use reciprocity in humour (Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2004).
Accurately assessing the intentions of others is difficult, so it is easy to understand why administrators would be drawn to black and white policies regarding humour. However, these simple policies can lead to negative consequences. Students in the school can become disengaged from the administration. And students who feel like they are no longer permitted to speak in the non-serious mode will close themselves off. There will be less information and support going both ways. Perhaps these risks are acceptable if these policies reduce bullying and save lives. But it is possible these policies will lead to a lessening of trust between the students, teachers, and administration, which could make changing student behaviour even more difficult.

**The play’s the thing.** How then can you separate hurtful humour from other humour? Perhaps the simplest way is to recall that humour is only possible in a state of play (Mills & Carwile, 2009). If a child is made the subject of a joke, and it is obvious that they cannot respond or are not expected to respond in a humorous manner, then they have not been invited to play. It is the intent behind the joke that separates jovial insults from humour used to harm. In the case of a direct bully it can be very easy to spot as the victim as the humour is focussed and aggressive and the victim is obviously not expected to respond in a playful manner. In the case of the indirect bully, however, a great deal of observation might be required, as the bully is hiding behind the humour’s greatest power—its ambivalence—and might disown his or her actions by pretending it is all in fun.

**As a teacher.** A teacher needs to know the students well and establish trust before engaging in sarcastic comments about them and must establish that sarcasm is play and not punishment (although most sarcastic statements will still have a message buried in them). Of course, if the teacher uses sarcasm but does not let the students use it back then the teacher is most likely using humour to shame and bully. But if sarcasm is used sensitively as part of the
classroom culture then students can become positively motivated by it: their class is unique, they can relate to their teacher, and they can use language in a complex, interesting way—all things that would make them more likely to go to class and be engaged while they’re there (Fine, 1977). Even then, there might be some students who just don’t understand the humour. Great care should be taken to speak to them clearly and make sure they do not feel like they are outside the group looking in.

When humour goes wrong in your class, you need to try to find the reasons behind what happened—the motives, the situation. Humour is a symptom. When it goes bad, you do not punish the use of humour, you punish what the humour was used for. For example, if someone is teasing someone else, you can’t simply assume this is bad, as teasing can be used to hurt or to play (Gordon, Kruger, & Kuban, 2006). Being a teacher requires constantly being in the middle of things and humour is definitely one of these things you will be in the middle of. Humour is complicated, diverse, and dangerous. It does not deal well with simple solutions or fiats against it. To use humour well, you need to evaluate every situation differently, and be prepared to try to understand it from everyone’s point of view. This isn’t easy, but having an understanding of humour will certainly help.
Part Five: Humour as an Opportunity

Humor is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritation and resentments slip away, and a sunny spirit takes their place.

Mark Twain

The purpose of this handbook was to help you understand humour, and through this understanding help you in your teaching in some small way. I hope I’ve been able to give you a better idea of how humour works, how pervasive it is, and how it can be used as a positive force in the classroom. I also hope I’ve shown you that humour is not limited to jokes, cartoons, and movies, but is also an important form of communication. Humour is a vital tool for interacting and surviving in the world.

When you view humour in this broader sense, the opportunities to use it to explore other topics and ideas expand. Humour can be used to understand cultures, our own and others, both now and in the past. And it can be used as a form of artistic expression, as a way for students to explore and to portray their view of the world to others.

Humour in Culture

George Carlin once said, “Have you ever noticed that anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac?” Humour is the same as driving—everyone thinks the stuff they find funny is truly humorous, and that only idiots and maniacs would laugh at things that are too juvenile, lame, or complicated.

Cultures are the same. Every culture—whether it’s the culture of a book club or of a nation—has its own way of using humour. Examining how a culture uses humour can help us
understand it. Although humour is universal, it is also particular, like language. All cultures have language, but if you don’t know the language, it’s only noise to you. Anyone who has immersed themselves in another culture quickly realizes that humour is, to some extent, local. Jokes that have served you well your whole life suddenly fall flat, and sometimes you only realize that a joke has been made when everyone is laughing but you.

By learning the language of humour in a culture you get a glimpse of what people are really concerned about, what they fear and dislike, what they think but cannot say directly. Power dynamics are particularly evident. Who makes the jokes and who laughs at them? What are people willing to joke about to the group as a whole, and what do they joke about privately? Often the subject of these private jokes will be the things people want to change, but can’t. Humour is the last weapon of the powerless.

Although humour is often used to strike at those that can’t be reached, it is also equally powerful at enforcing conformity. To be a part of a group you must share in its sense of humour (Martin, 2007). Every time you laugh with someone you are making a statement. You are agreeing that what you are laughing at is funny and that you share a sense of humour. If a joke is made and you are not comfortable with it, you have a decision to make. Do you pretend to laugh and support it, or do you mention that you don’t think it’s funny and risk censure from the group?

In discussions with students you can use these concepts to examine our own society. Who do we laugh at? It used to okay to make Newfie jokes and Polish jokes and Irish jokes in public, but not now. Why? It still seems acceptable to make fat jokes, but no longer to make gay jokes. What does this tell us? Can this understanding be applied to our own use of humour in the groups we are a part of?
Humour is often used by a culture at the expense of those outside of the culture. This is evident in ethnic humour on the national scale to bullying at the school level. Indirect bullies use humour to gain support from a group and to isolate a victim outside it. It is easy for group members to support the bully because they can excuse their own behaviour as simply laughing at a joke. Even if they don’t feel like laughing, there is pressure to do so anyway for fear of putting yourself outside of the culture.

By examining culture through humour you give your students a framework to understand how they use humour in the groups they’re in. And the next time someone’s being laughed at they can ask themselves—Is the person being laughed at enjoying this? Is this a group I want to be a part of? What does this say about me?

**Humour in History**

*Even the gods love jokes*

*Plato*

You don’t need to limit yourself to the cultures of today. By looking at how humour was used in history you gain a better understanding of how people used to think and act. You also humanize the past. It is easy for history to focus on facts, deeds, and noble thoughts. This is understandable, history is vast and there is only so much of it you can relate at one time. Unfortunately, it makes our forbearers seem very serious indeed. By showing your students just a bit of humour from the time you are studying, you can help them realize that history in not simply about statistics, it is about people and how they lived in the world.

Looking at the past through humour can also help us understand the world today. Fifty years ago it was perfectly normal for a comic to do an act by pretending to be drunk or by
performing as an ethnic stereotype. If you showed this humour to a modern audience, however, many people would find it offensive or over the line. By presenting this change to your students you can engage them in a discussion about the broader transformations that have taken place. How did certain topics go from being considered funny then to being considered completely unacceptable now, and how does this connect to what was happening in the society as a whole? What else was going on at this time?

You can also demonstrate recurring human behaviours—like the use of humour during times of war. In war, some topics (like making fun of your own leaders) are suddenly considered out of bounds, and humour that would formerly have been considered over the top (such as making grotesque caricatures of another race or culture) become acceptable, even expected, when this other group becomes “the enemy.” What is going on here? How does power affect the way people find certain things funny? How is humour used to support a war?

Humour makes history come alive. Students can get the impression that the great men and women they are learning about, like Socrates, were always considered great. In fact at the time Socrates was developing his philosophy he was considered strange and possibly subversive by much of Athenian society. A writer of comedic plays, Aristophanes, wrote an entire play attacking Socrates. In “The Clouds," Aristophanes portrays Socrates as a silly, foolish, clown of a teacher who instructs his students on how to cheat their way out of debt. The actor portraying Socrates would have worn a grotesque mask to ensure the audience knew Socrates was meant to be a subject of ridicule. This is an important lesson for students to learn, that new ideas are often laughed at before they are accepted, and that the mocking of public figures, very much like the satirical television shows of today, has existed for a long time.
Humour as Artistic Expression

Good humor isn't a trait of character, however. It is an art, which requires practice.

David Seabury (Seabury, 1964)

In this handbook I have avoided talking about how to create works of humour. To do this any justice at all would require another book. But I think it is would be remiss of me if I failed to mention that humour is an important art form and that students should have the opportunity to express themselves through it. Humour can provide an outlet for students who feel uncomfortable expressing things directly. Most students like to use humour, and they have an instinctual ability to create it. If there’s a kid in your class who’s a smartass, why not give him or her the chance to do an assignment through humour? This might be the thing that finally gets them to put something down on paper.

There are a many ways to get students to use humour. They can create historical comedic sketches, they can draw cartoons, or they can write a funny song. You can give them opportunities to use it freely or you can focus on particular forms of humour such as comedic script writing or stand-up comedy. You can also use humour for a specific learning goal—have them write historical limericks, create a parody of a novel they have read, or write a funny song about learning the Pythagorean theorem (yes, this can be done). For them to accomplish any of these comedic assignments they'll first have to know the material they are basing their humour on.

It is vitally important when asking students to create with humour, that you allow them some freedom when coming up with their ideas. The brainstorming part of humour-making can be messy and easily result in material that is well over the line. This happens because most of the
funny stuff is on the line, so in the process of creation the ideas will be all over the place. Just make sure the students only use and develop what is acceptable in your class. I would also strongly advise you to take a look at what the students have created before they present it in class. You just never know when the principal is going to walk through the door.
In Conclusion

Humor is not a mood but a way of looking at the world. So if it is correct to say that humor was stamped out in Nazi Germany that does not mean that people were not in good spirits, or anything of that sort, but something much deeper and more important.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1980)

Okay, I know that bringing in the Nazis, especially in the conclusion, is a heavy-handed rhetorical device, but I think the point this quotation makes is worth it—that humour is deeper and more important than it often gets credit for, and that the elimination of humour means the dominance of one way of thinking, one way of doing, and one way of communicating. I don’t think this is what any of us want for our children, especially in the place they spend the most time in, our schools.

Schools have a reputation of being serious places, where serious things happen, seriously. Fortunately, all the schools I’ve ever been in have also been silly places where silly things happen silly. This humour is seldom officially encouraged but is a product of teachers and students bringing it with them simply because it is impossible for them not to.

Hierarchical organizations have a hard time dealing with humour and schools are no exception. Humour causes confusion, questioning, and non-serious behaviour—not exactly the things that a rule-driven organization wants to be dealing with. The trouble is that if we want our students to be creative, think for themselves, and enjoy learning, then we need them to do more than simply follow rules—we need them to play with them. And for this to happen they need a space where they feel free to use humour.

You can create that space.
Humour your students and they’ll humour you.
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