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The Magic of Using Humor in the Classroom!

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Introduction

Every year scholars in the field of education are searching for new and better ways to reach students and make a more significant difference in their lives. Professors are all too often sticking to their "tried and true" teaching styles and for some people these styles seem to be effective. However, our students' world of learning has changed in the last century and for a large percentage of our students the old "read the text and listen to lectures" teaching style is not working so well, anymore.

Today, there are new strategies that are making great strides in grabbing the attention of students and motivating them to take action and actually apply the information we professors are dedicated to passing on to them. The new strategy in education is the use of the *power of humor!*

How Does Humor Work?

Every single day we are learning ways fun and humor used in the classroom with our students creates a positive learning environment. It eases daily anxiety and tension that interrupts focus and clarity and it stimulates both sides of the brain to enhance learning to allow people to retain more information. Research has demonstrated that humor prior to an examination also reduces stress prior to taking a test and produces better test scores! (Yoder, 1989)

How does humor do this? First of all, laughter decreases stress by reducing four of the major hormones associated with stress. Laughter also diffuses anger and conflict fast and puts problems in perspective and alleviates bitterness and resentment. Once stress and anger and conflict are decreased, a person can focus more clearly. (Morell, 1997)

Benefits of the Use of Humor with Students in the Classroom

Studies are now showing that fun and laughter also strengthens relationships making students more apt to listen to and respect people because they like them. People like people who make them lighten up and laugh. This does not mean that an educator has to be a comedian. It means that if we allow fun and laughter present in the classroom and encourage humor among our students it pays off in our relationships with them. (Loans, Kolberg,1993)

Fun and laughter are valuable tools to enhance teamwork. Corporations are now hiring "Humor Task Forces" because the fun and humor they are encouraging in the workplace is proving to increase productivity. Employers have learned that another very important benefit of the use of fun and humor in the workplace is retention of productive employees! I have learned that the benefit of retention also applies to students in the college classroom. (Henderson)

Have you ever taught a class where it appeared that some of your students had tuned out of your classroom activities and moved to another channel? Information in our courses sometimes is not as exciting or as interesting as other times. When this occurs, unexpected fun and humor will catch the bored students off-guard and bring them back to the fold! The use of humor in these situations works like magic. Students begin to immediately become involved and want to hear more that is making the other students smile or laugh. Fun and laughter are the perfect cure for boredom.

Guidelines to Follow When Using Humor with Students

Scientific evidence on the effectiveness of humor and its benefits is overwhelming. Below are some guidelines to follow when using humor with students in the classroom.

- Humor must always be all inclusive and never, ever hurt, humiliate or embarrass anyone! In fact, the most effective humor is when we tell on ourselves. This kind of humor our students really enjoy, it is safe and almost always is fresh, new material

- Remember that effective fun and humor is so much more than telling a joke! Using unusual and humorous examples when making a point is a wonderful way to get the students' attention. Humorous examples also help students to remember information. The rule is often "tell it serious, tell it funny and then tell it serious, again." (Paulson, 1989) The best kind of humor is when we tell stories on ourselves, share embarrassing moments, or come up with a silly definition that will help students remember the lessons.

- One of a teacher's best sources of humor is when we tell funny or embarrassing situations on ourselves or when the students tell funny experiences on themselves. Somehow, sharing humorous stories about ourselves with each other puts us all on a level playing field. Intimidation begins to disappear and real teamwork begins! When I encourage students to share their stories and ideas and show them, I honestly enjoy their points of view, the rest of the class begins to enjoy sharing their stories, as well. Almost every classroom has some students who have a terrific sense of humor and love to laugh at themselves, with the professor or at something about the subject matter of the course. I love to have them participate because it keeps students interested in the class and in each other. Humor has a magical way of building a sense of community among the members of the class.

- Coming up with unexpected topics for students to discuss about the course material and how it affects them can also be extremely humorous. Students love to exaggerate how things affect them and the other students in the class love it. This use of humor also facilitates learning and adds the dimension of creativity. (Beck, 1998) When the time comes in class to seriously sum up the big ideas of the day or evening, of course, be serious. However, it is the fun and humorous moments that transpired during these sessions that help students remember the important serious information we teachers are striving to impart.

- An easy assignment that always provides fun and humorous experiences for students is the group project. This is a wonderful opportunity to teach our students that it is okay to have fun working on something important. In fact, it is in this assignment where we as teachers can encourage students to take laughter seriously because the benefits are numerous. When working together in the spirit of play, differences begin to dissolve, risks become adventures, and even the most timid of students reveal many hidden talents. Streaks of genius emerge and both the teacher and learner become receptive to exploring new possibilities. (Loomis and Kolberg,1993)

Summary and Conclusion

"The topic I teach is not humorous" said the boring professor. Do not fall for this excuse! Be creative and you will find places for fun and humor in any presentation.

If you find it difficult to begin using humor in your classroom, there are hundreds of books and articles available on the internet that provide personal humor teaching experiences, a lot of examples and tips and strategies that are so easy you will wonder why you didn't think of them! One professor reminded me to keep using my "winners". When a specific story or example is a hit with your class, don't be afraid to use it over and over again with many classes. Be proud of your new teaching strategies and never apologize for telling one of your stories; you are giving the gift of laughter. (Paulson, 2013)

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