

The nature and techniques of critical thought allow us to form a basis for our own beliefs, values and attitudes and the way we respond to the world. Thinking skills consist of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Thinking skills are employed within a larger context in response to some challenging condition: dichotomies, incongruities, dilemmas, ambiguities, paradoxes, conflicts, enigmas or obstacles, for which resolutions are not immediately apparent.

The exploration of humorous texts enhances thinking skills and broadens our awareness of the world in a relevant, enjoyable and challenging way. Humour requires us to be flexible in our thinking. We must consider multiple perspectives, compare established facts with alternatives simultaneously, observe and interpret, reason and infer, value and judge (or suspend judgement) as well as tolerate paradox, predict consequences and develop options. With humour, minds are open to change (based on additional information, opinions, data or reasoning), even when faced with contradictory information.

Types of thinking skills used to understand humorous texts include:

- 1) creative thinking, which means playing with ideas in your mind in an innovative or ingenious way;
- 2) imaginative thinking where you create pictures or images in your mind;
- 3) conceptualizing to create images of time and space in your mind;
- 4) exploratory thinking where you manipulate ideas within and through texts;
- 5) analytical thinking to determine the elements that make up a whole;
- 6) logical thinking where you can predict an outcome from a given set of circumstances;
- 7) comparative thinking which identifies similarities and differences amongst two or more things;
- 8) retrospective thinking where you review familiar things and make connections between them;
- 9) speculative thinking which requires you to anticipate or predict future occurrences on the basis of existing understanding and knowledge;
- 10) inferential thinking which enables you to make connections between what is stated and what is implied;
- 11) flexible thinking, especially when you are required to hold various possibilities in your mind at the same time;
- 12) social thinking which allows you to make connections in a collaborative situation;
- 13) paradoxical thinking, when you hold two or more contradictory ideas in your mind at the same time;

- 14) suspending disbelief so that you let go of logic and deal with incongruity;
- 15) parodical thinking which enables you to identify ridiculous aspects of an idea or situation;
- 16) evaluative thinking, where you make assessments about the value of something or someone; and
- 17) judgemental thinking that requires you to make decisions about what is socially appropriate or taboo.

Studying spoken, written, and other media text types widens a student's focus. When students think critically they:

- become pro-active readers/listeners/viewers predicting, hypothesising, inferring and deducing, and checking for evidence which either confirms, extends or refines expectations;
- become reflective readers/listeners/viewers developing awareness of text-types, understanding text purpose and organisation, and relating texts to one another in a way that will improve their own writing, for example, analysis of sound effects in comics improves phonological awareness;
- judge and value texts, forming personal preferences and responses, noticing and remembering texts or parts of texts which are significant, building a repertoire of known or accessible texts as points of reference for comparing, criticising and as models for composing their own new and novel texts.

Creativity is central to every aspect of literacy development. Creativity disposes us to explore, play with and invent language and to evolve more effective ways in spoken and written expression. Creativity is an important element of thinking. A willingness to explore and invent patterns and connections, is the root of generalisation, investigation and rule construction, while the capacity to suppose, pretend, adopt roles and suspend belief are at the heart of imaginative and logical thinking. Students can explore creativity in all sorts of humorous texts (poems, plays, cautionary tales, nonsense verse, folktales, myths, legends, picture books, comics, cartoons, graphic novel, film and television) and language devices (word plays, jokes, poems, word games, absurdities, assonance, rhyme, rhythm, ambiguity, puns, banter, imagery, metaphor, parody).

The basic elements of humour in texts are:

- A) subject matter
- B) situation
- C) characters
- D) timing.

A) Subject matter

What is a funny subject matter depends on the age and development of readers, listeners and viewers. Students have a healthy interest in the human body. They enjoy humour about:

- food/drink (gluttony/deprivation)

- sexuality (clothes/dress and undress)
- bodily functions, especially body emissions.
- embarrassments
- ridicule of society
- ridicule of adults

B) Situation

Situational humour arises:

- where the writer upsets the reader's expectations, for example, when a principal calls someone by the wrong name or when a bomb explodes with confetti.
- where the writer sets up a certain expectation then writes a surprise ending. An element of surprise is vital to humour. You can have enduring tragedy but not enduring surprise or an enduring joke.
- when the rules of reason are relaxed. The impossible becomes possible. Logic and disbelief are suspended. To do this a reader/listener/viewer must turn off their self-conscious and self-sensors.
- when exploring the taboo. This often occurs within the safe framework of rhymes, jokes, riddles, chants etc.
- from the humour of contrast, for example, when roles or features are switched – a clumsy trapeze artist, twins swapping identity, someone substituting honey for shampoo at a school camp. For older children the humour of convention suspension comes from adults who are seen as incompetent or inept.
- from situations when authority figures are opposed. For younger children the authority figures are parents and teachers whilst older children and adults are happy to ridicule political, religious, and law-enforcement institutions.
- from satire. This is cutting humour which sets out to show what's wrong with the world. It has a moral point of view and uses cynicism which can be quite malicious.
- from parody. This is an imitation of a work of an author with the idea of ridiculing a work, an author, or ideals. Appreciation of parody occurs at a very young age with the enjoyment of fractured fairytales, never-ending songs, word substitutions in nursery rhymes etc.
- from topical humour or 'in' jokes. This involves parodying or satirising a specific subject of current interest. Even a catastrophe can be dealt with through topical or 'in' humour.

- from slapstick. This is a visual or physical form of humour where one thing leads to another which leads to another. Exaggeration leads to disastrous results. It is well-suited to performance, film and television, comics and cartoons.

- from absurdities. Contrast and exaggeration contribute to absurdities. Sneezing someone's wig off or slipping on a pea. An elephant who is afraid of bananas or a very large man who enjoys needlepoint are examples of absurdities.

- from incongruities where something that seems strange because it does not fit in its proper place or situation.

- from human predicaments. Students are also developing an awareness of who they are and their place in the world. It is a time for experimenting with relationships, friendships as well as partnerships. Consequently they enjoy telling and listening to anecdotes, especially if it involves embarrassment of themselves or others. Stories about a fat, juicy pimple, or the time they fell off the stage, or when their costume fell down are all sources of great merriment.

- from irony. This is a form of humour where you say or do the opposite of what you mean. It is a mode of expression conveying a reality different from, and usually opposite to, appearances or expectation. Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony. It expresses disapproval in the guise of praise.

- from the burlesque. This is a work designed to ridicule a style, literary form or a subject matter by either exalting the trivial or trivialising the exalted. It is often derisive. It is a work that caricatures or satirises something serious. The tragedy can easily be burlesqued.

- from farce. This type of comedy emphasizes improbable situations, violent conflicts, physical action, and coarse wit over characterisation or articulated plot.

- from the comic relief to relieve tension.

- from the situations that characters find themselves in. Nearly every situation is potentially funny.

C) Character

- Characters who have fears and flaws are funny, for example, a clumsy trapeze artist or an absent-minded professor.

- Funny characters are unusual, strange, odd, maybe obnoxious, often extreme. A truly funny character is often a caricature, a creature of the writer's imagination. It is not someone you know.

- Characters can be given funny names.

- Funny characters are often in conflict, for example, they act one way but think another. They often struggle and fail. Funny characters suffer in some way, for example, humiliation, confusion, or worry.

- Humour reveals much about a person's character. Humorous characters are more likeable. An odious character is humourless.

- Banter between characters often reflects the friendly relationship between the characters without having to spell it out. Banter tends not to be insulting or hurtful. The two people know each other so well they can up the other without missing a beat or disturbing the rhythm.

- Often the funniest characters are those trying not to be funny, for example, a character in a foreign country who mixes up the language or a character who is deaf and 'mishears' a conversation.

- Characters can be funny by talking funny. There are many ways to talk funny:

- 1) Puns ie words which have the same sound, but with different meanings.
- 2) Double meanings or ambiguities.
- 3) Word plays
- 4) Made-up words.
- 5) Understatement.
- 6) Plain Talk. This is often what everyone is dying to say but they don't dare for fear of being seen as politically incorrect. Ask yourself 'What is *not* said?' and you'll find an opening for humour.
- 7) Jokes
- 8) Internal dialogue, especially if the character is unable to speak their mind.
- 9) Asides
- 10) A character may be the 'straight man' for the resident wit.
- 11) Insults
- 12) Sarcasm Harsh form of wit, aimed to wound, which often employs irony.
- 13) Anecdotes
- 14) Taboo language
- 15) Exaggeration or understatement where you stretch or downplay the truth.
- 16) Substitutions, for example, homework is fun.
- 17) Euphemisms. This is the substitution of a mild or less negative word or phrase for a harsh or blunt one, for example, to 'pass away' instead of 'die'.
- 18) Oxymorons. The juxtaposition of two contradictory ideas, for example, sweet sorrow, original copy.
- 19) Malapropisms

D) Timing

- The writer/illustrator/producer sets up the humour for the reader, viewer, or listener.
- Silence will be written in.

- Repetition can be used to build suspense.

Literacy is embedded in a complex range of social, political, and ideological contexts. As such it is important to utilise as many tools as possible in the classroom to assist students in attaining literacy competence. Humour is one of those tools.

There are very few studies that have been done on the impact of humour to improve literacy. There is also very little written about humour and literature. Yet humour is a fantastic tool for getting children to read. The language of humour is the same language developed in literacy. The ability to tell stories, use metaphors, present contradictory ideas, create images, use rhythm and rhyme and metre, tell jokes etc can be found in both. Given this, it makes sense to use the features of one to assist the other. Humour can flag for the budding reader cognitive tools to construct meaning and sense.

The great power of stories is that they communicate information in a memorable form. They can also orient the listener's feelings about the information being communicated. Humorous stories can orient the reader to not only understand what is being read, but to enjoy the process.

In oral cultures thinking involves the complex logic of metaphor more than it follows the systematic logic of rational inquiry. Metaphor involves representation of one thing as though it were something other. The use of language rich in appropriate metaphors can stimulate creativity. Humour is rich in metaphoric language. In literacy, however, there is more reliance on rational logic and less on the logic of metaphor. Perhaps the metaphor of humour can enrich the student's transition to literacy.

The ability to distinguish difference in the form of contradiction, together with the ability to perceive resemblances, is basic to both humour and literacy and can be a powerful tool in the teaching of literacy. Literacy moves language from a medium connected uniquely to the ear to one also connected to the eye. Literacy enables us to reflect on, and become conscious of, language in a new way. Humorous texts also draw attention to language.

With the development of language came the curious discovery that words could be used to generate images in the mind. Imaginative thinking in humour also creates pictures or images in the mind. This image-generation is a cognitive tool for teaching literacy.

Our culture tends to dismiss humorous texts, especially literature, as lightweight and unworthy. Humour is seen as subversive and thus threatening to adult authority whereas the more serious issues-based texts are seen as literary and more worthy. When June Factor studied children's folklore she found that all collectors of folklore omitted humour. The same omission occurred in literature. When the Brothers Grimm started to collect and record folk tales they deliberately left out comic stories. Yet, young children love the incongruity of exaggeration, as well as the slapstick of Dr Seuss.

Older children love linguistic play and reading for fun. Roald Dahl, for one, was able to capture the impossible, the absurd and the bizarre. Kids love his quirkiness and his fun with language. They value the intricate significances that most adults can no longer see and appreciate. Because humour is extraordinarily diverse with a hierarchy of complexity the less sophisticated reader can share a joke with a more sophisticated reader, even if their depth of understanding differs. What a wonderful tool to use in a class of ranging abilities and development.

So what about humour in the classroom?

Using humour in the classroom can:

- decrease student anxiety and stress
- decrease teacher anxiety and stress
- contribute to classroom unity
- increase receptiveness to learning
- assist in teacher-student rapport
- improve school enjoyment
- make an uninteresting topic enjoyable
- improve memory
- break the monotony of classroom routine
- improve self-esteem

Teacher attitude influences whether or not humour is used in the classroom. Attitudes can vary from 'I'm hopeless at telling jokes' to 'It's going to lead to classroom chaos' to 'It's a complete waste of time'. For some, the reluctance will stem from an inadequate knowledge base. Yet, humorous texts are a wonderful classroom tool to facilitate learning outcomes. Below are some suggestions for managing humour:

- 1) Be prepared so that you know exactly your purpose for using humorous texts. To help with impromptu situations keep a collection of funny stories, anecdotes, newspaper articles, comics and jokes on hand.
- 2) Don't force the humour and try to be something or someone you're not. You don't need to be a stand-up comedian. You don't even have to tell jokes. All you need is a sense of humour and a preparedness to laugh at yourself and the world.
- 3) Accept that laughter is not anarchic.
- 4) Be flexible in how you incorporate humour. Try a variety of genres and styles, for example, poems, prose, comics, songs, chants, films, plays, picture books etc. Classes will vary in their proficiency in interpreting, discussing and analysing humour.
- 5) Avoid private humour that may exclude some members of the class.
- 6) Do not use humour as a form of student put-down. This is demeaning and increases stress levels all round.
- 7) Be aware of factors that impact on humour such as cultural issues, religion, gender, age, social group.
- 8) Do not over-use humour or it will lose its value.
- 9) Incorporate humour as a natural and integral part of classroom behaviour. This prevents it from being labelled as 'special' and potentially a problem.
- 10) Ensure that the humour is relevant to learning outcomes.
- 11) Keep tasks to pairs or small groups to contain the laughter.
- 12) Use taboo humour to lead in to discussions about prejudice, stereotyping, offensive language, offensive subject matter or behaviour and black humour.
- 13) Discuss how humour can be used as a weapon ranging from simple sarcasm, to parody and barbed wit, to satire.

- 14) Students from different cultures can share their experiences of humour with others. How well do jokes travel?
- 15) If hesitant about using humour, save it for the last half hour of the day when the spill-over effect will be minimal.
- 16) Create a balance between what is enjoyable and what is conducive to learning.
- 17) Pair up with another class. One teacher can give the lesson while the other is vigilant on crowd-control.
- 18) Schadenfreude is when humans experience pleasure at the misfortune of others. Open up for class discussion why this is so. This is possibly seen more in situations where their self-esteem is decreased.
- 19) Tell humorous stories in episodes to keep students wanting more.

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