

Joking and Humour

What are joking and humor cognitive tools?

Joking and humor can expose some of the basic ways in which language works and, at the same time, allow students to play with elements of knowledge, so discovering some of learning's rewards. These cognitive tools can also assist the struggle against arteriosclerosis of the imagination—helping in the fight against rigid conventional uses of rules and showing students rich dimensions of knowledge and encouraging flexibility of mind.

In the imaginative classroom we will expect to see much more humor than is currently common. Students will be encouraged to generate good jokes about what they are learning. A few math jokes...Why is 6 afraid of 7? Because 7, 8, 9. (7 ate 9. O.K., you got it first time.) What goes 99 thump, 99 thump, 99 thump... A centipede with a wooden leg. Why are two times 10 the same as two times 11? Because two times ten equals 20, and two times 11 equals twenty, too. (Twenty-two)

How can we employ joking and humor in teaching?

Topic: Properties of water

Subject Area: Science

Cognitive Tool: Jokes and Humor

Students can explore the cultural dimensions of water and its properties by considering the language associated with water. Why is it that there is a negative connotation to most words describing water? Would you want someone to call you a “drip”? What would a “drippy” person look like? What if someone says you are “all wet”? What exactly are you in that case? They might also brainstorm, following a unit of study, all the terms they have learned associated with water and make jokes about it. By analyzing the nature of the jokes—and other expressions we commonly use that employ terms related to water—students can get a better sense of the nature of water.

Topic: Capitalization

Subject Area: English/Language Arts

Cognitive Tool: Jokes and Humor

What did they call the guy sitting in the soup pot? Stu. How about the guy sitting in the hole in the ground? Phil. Through jokes students create using proper names that also have equivalents (stew, fill) they can get a sense of when to capitalize proper nouns. Students could explore the stories behind strange places like Looneyville, Texas, or Last Chance, Colorado. Have you ever been to Nothing Arizona (how do you know when you've arrived?). I don't know about you, but I'm headed for Hot Coffee, Mississippi.

Why do joking and humor engage our imaginations?

One consequence of literacy is that language becomes visible. Literacy moves language from a medium connected uniquely to the ear to one also connected to the eye. In general, we simply don't notice how profoundly this change affects how we understand language. Literacy, then, enables us to reflect on, and become conscious of, language in a somewhat new way. Within orality, of course, there are also techniques that draw attention to language and help us to become conscious of it. One of these techniques is the joke.

When is a door not a door? When it's ajar! (side-splitting laughing)

This joke about a door being (a)jar is indeed only meaningful in an oral environment. Written down its visibility would undermine it. For much of the time, it is useful to bear in mind, the classroom is an oral environment. Often enough, though, such jokes can survive into a literate environment because they rely on homonyms.

Doctor: Did you take the patient's temperature?

Nurse: No. Is it missing?

Or

Jim: Should you eat fried chicken with your fingers?

Jane: No. You should eat your fingers separately.

Perhaps not the greatest jokes in the world, but each has the educational value of drawing attention to language as an object, something that contributes to the development of "metacognitive awareness" that seems to be important for intellectual development. But to accept the latent invitation that language offers to manipulate it, one needs to recognize the possibility. That recognition can be stimulated by particular kinds of jokes.

Well, one needn't get bogged down in the analysis of the joke to recognize that there is something oddly comic about human attempts to understand the world around us. We bring such pitiful equipment to the task. We were designed to live in groups, find food, procreate and die, and here we are trying to grasp the stars and fit the universe into the categories of our cognition. Not exactly futile, but good that children learn something about the cosmic dimension of the comedy of learning about the world as well as learning the peculiar trick of making a part of our thinking external to our bodies, and taking into our minds the thoughts of others perhaps long dead.