

Editorial

Humor in Education: Schooled to Death?

In his book *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud (1938) contended that jokes or humor in general receive only slight consideration by philosophers and researchers, in spite of the important part humor plays in the life of most people. Apart from amusement, Freud pointed out that jokes are often a socially acceptable means to broach or mention subjects in conversation that would otherwise be considered inappropriate. Usually such subjects relate to bodily functions or the deprecation of group or personal attributes. It is the manifestation of such subjects either as a surprise or as a deliberate construct that, Freud argues, leads people to find the information humorous. For example, there are many blonde jokes. One, based in Alberta, entails two blondes sitting by a lake in the evening. One sees the moon and wonders aloud, "Which is further away, the moon or Florida?" "Hellooo," replies the second, "Can you see Florida from here?" Rather than perceiving this as a slight against blondes, which is not humorous, the humor lies in the seemingly naïve, but simple question followed by the illogical twist in the response.

As humor is a part of life, it follows that it should also be a part of education. Indeed it seems that even many years ago some educators advocated the use of humor. The Roman orator and educator of the first century CE Quintilian (1.1.24-25) contended that the use of humor in teaching would serve as a means of motivating pupils to be engaged with what was being learned. It seems obvious, however, that what comprises something humorous to a pupil may not be seen as humorous by an adult. Moreover, what comprises *appropriate* humor is more difficult to define.

Many years ago, when I was in my first year of senior high school, I took a mathematics course taught by an extremely large and rotund man. Besides an enormous girth, he had a stocky build, a brush-cut hair style, and he was always attired in a canary yellow shirt and a blue pin-striped, three-piece suit. In addition, because my class was the first in the day, he arrived at the classroom carrying books and a bunch of colorful flowers, which he placed in a crystal vase on his desk. After writing information on the chalkboard, he preferred to remain seated at his desk for the remainder of the class. If any of us had problems, we walked to his desk. This was also about the time I had discovered Rex Stout's fictional detective Nero Wolfe. To me the description and mannerisms of Nero Wolfe were uncannily similar to those of my mathematics teacher, so much so that on one occasion I could not restrain myself. One morning our teacher entered the room as usual and said, "Good morning." Most of us in the class responded in kind, also adding his name. On this occasion, I responded, "Good morning, Mr. Wolfe." Just like Nero Wolfe, my teacher stopped and at first scowled at me. In a few seconds, though, his demeanor changed. He began to smile, then his enormous frame started to shake with laughter. His rejoinder was, "Very good, Archie," referring to me as Nero Wolfe's assistant Archie Goodwin. Of course, some people in the class knew what was being referred to and laughed, whereas others were clueless.

The teacher took the opportunity of the seemingly deprecatory humor to make a “teachable moment.” After explaining the joke, he asked us to each read a detective novel or recall one that we had read and come prepared the following week with suggestions as to where and how in police work trigonometry might be used. The class was memorable because most of us suggested trigonometry as a means of calculating the trajectory of bullets or knife wounds. We also received several practical problems, where we put our trigonometric skills to work. That I still recall this particular class after more than 30 years suggests that the humor did contribute to making a lasting memory.

Certainly my teacher could have felt hurt and insulted because I was comparing him to a character that might be considered fat, gluttonous, self-absorbed, and inertia-bound. Instead the humor of the physical comparison was appreciated and used to positive effect. Similarly, I recall other teachers, both in grade school and in university, who used various forms of humor as a memory aid and a means of motivation. The methods ranged from Freudian slips such as “the founder of psychoanalysis was Dr. Sigmund Fraud,” to the use of ambiguous howlers such as “Donald lived with his wife, his high school sweetheart, and his family,” to subtle double meanings such as the unfortunate, but mercifully short-lived proposed name for a political party, “Canadian Conservative Reform Alliance” (Absoluteastronomy.com, 2005). Although the humor was not the focal point, it served to add a dimension to the topic at hand. Analogously, the subject was the main ingredient, whereas the humor provided the spice. My experience with humor as a student led me to use humor extensively in my teaching.

To be sure not all educators used or use humor. In one school where I taught, two signs were displayed prominently near the principal’s office. One stated, “We do not tolerate intolerance.” The second proclaimed, “Jokes are like guns. They are great fun until someone gets hurt.” The principal was of the conviction that all forms of humor indicated either a lack of discipline or a tendency to hold others up to “hatred, ridicule, and contempt,” the legal definition of slander and libel. Unfortunately, such dourness and lack of humor usually prompts others to inject humor. On numerous occasions students in my classes asked me why the principal was so dead set against humor. As I was not able to provide them with a satisfactory answer, some students took it upon themselves to reacquaint the principal, who taught one class in science, with humor. He had a penchant for using the overhead projector because he could keep his eyes on the class while he was writing.

One day some students entered the classroom early, taped a centerfold from a risqué magazine onto the projection screen, raised the screen, and left. Unfortunately for the principal, the superintendent was visiting every class in the school that day. The superintendent happened to be in the principal’s class when he lowered the screen while maintaining his implacable gaze on the students. Although I was not in the classroom, I was next door and could hear the laughter. Apparently the principal did not notice the centerfold at first and proceeded with the lesson. Only when the superintendent was laughing along with the students did the principal realize what had happened. Perhaps surprisingly, the principal’s attitude changed somewhat. Gone were the signs,

and each morning during the announcements to the school he would read a little joke.

Nevertheless, with increased awareness or hypersensitivity to what may be termed *political correctness* some people in education seem to wish either to remove humor altogether or to sanitize it to the extent that it is either no longer humorous or is forced. For example, in early April this year, it was announced that in the children's program *Sesame Street* the hand puppet Cookie Monster would no longer engage in the previous behavior of frenziedly devouring entire plates of cookies all at once. The contention was that by continuing this behavior, Cookie Monster might be serving as a symbolic model to children, who in turn imitate such behavior (Associated Press, 2005). Cookie Monster is not a new character, and I recall seeing the puppet in episodes during the 1970s. The puppet was memorable to me because it has a goofy appearance, primarily because of the toy eyes that incessantly spin around; it has a limited vocabulary (usually the word *cookie*); and it exhibits an almost complete lack of table manners, complete with loud belching after gorging. In other words, Cookie Monster is humorous. Although I do not watch *Sesame Street* habitually, small children of my acquaintance who do find the antics of Cookie Monster extremely humorous. Moreover, I can report that none of my younger relations who grew into adulthood while watching *Sesame Street* exhibit any behavior that could be considered even similar to that of Cookie Monster. If anything, Cookie Monster's behavior demonstrated the contrast between appropriate and inappropriate table manners. I have little doubt that a child attempting to model Cookie Monster's behavior would receive immediate corrective feedback.

Instead of a funny puppet that loses control when cookies are present, we will be presented with a new, more restrained Cookie Monster who will eat cookies more abstemiously and who will also eat more nutritious fare. Although nothing has been said about renaming Cookie Monster given the recent course of action, I suspect that a name change will not be long in coming. Somehow, *Vegetable Monster*, although humorous by the ludicrous name, will not have the same cachet as Cookie Monster. Is such action to be the general trend of humor in education?

G.H. Buck

References

- Absoluteastronomy.com. (2005). Canadian Alliance. *Absolute astronomy encyclopedia*. Retrieved May 2, 2005, from http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/C/Ca/Canadian_Alliance.htm
- Associated Press. (2005, April 7). *Has cookie monster given up sweets? "Sesame Street" advocates healthy eating habits*. Retrieved May 2, 2005, from: <http://www.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/TV/04/07/tv.cookie.lessmonster.ap/>
- Freud, S. (1938). Wit and its relation to the unconscious. In A.A. Brill (Trans. & Ed.), *The basic writings of Sigmund Freud*. New York: Basic Books.
- Quintilian. *Institutio oratoria, I* (H.E. Butler, Trans. 1921). London: Heinemann.