



## Using Humor in the Classroom

*Laughter has the power to fuel engagement and help students learn*

*By Robert McNeely, special for NEA.org*



Illinois English teacher Tracee O. used to dread teaching grammar and mechanics. That is, until she started using humorous, real-life examples of what not to do in her lessons. "You can find so many examples on the Internet: cakes with misspelled words, advertisements or signs that use improper punctuation, etc.," she says. "I started a Pinterest board with examples, so I'll draw from those when we need to review a skill while writing." Now, teaching English "is a lot more fun for everyone," she says.

But beyond the fun factor, humor can be an effective way to engage students and activate learning. We asked NEA members to share some of the ways they use humor in the classroom and here's what they told us.

### Create a Comfortable Learning Environment

When teachers share a laugh or a smile with students, they help students feel more comfortable and open to learning. Using humor brings enthusiasm, positive feelings, and optimism to the classroom.

Even if you're not naturally funny, you still can lighten things up a bit! The key thing to remember is to do what's comfortable for you. Not only will it make you more approachable, it will also help put students more at ease in your classroom.

### Fire Up Their Brains

During her research on learning and humor, educator-researcher Mary Kay Morrison looked at brain scans that showed high levels of activity in multiple areas of the brain when humor was used in conversation and instruction.

"We're finding humor actually lights up more of the brain than many other functions in a classroom," says Morrison, author of *Using Humor to Maximize Learning*. "In other words, if you're listening just auditorily in a classroom, one small part of the brain lights up, but humor maximizes learning and strengthens memories."

### Bring Content to Life

Teachers can use humor to bring content to life—through games, parody, or comical voices (or wigs or hats). Students respond to their teacher's playfulness and appreciate the effort he or she puts into making a lesson fun.

### Final Thoughts

Every teacher's goal is to be effective in the classroom and help students learn. Educators want their students to be eager and engaged. Humor has the power to fuel that engagement.

"Humor must be used in the classroom," says Pamela Matway, a sixth-grade social studies teacher at Sedgwick Middle School, in West Hartford, Connecticut. "Joke, laugh, dance, sing, shout. I do it all; I think every teacher should. It helps kids stay focused on the lesson, and sometimes it even helps them remember ideas and motivates them. So stand up on that desk and tap dance while you give instructions, talk in an English accent, or sing the answers to a homework assignment."