Using Comics, Humor, and Hands-On Toys in Teaching

Michael K. McBeath
Department of Psychology
Arizona State University

Article Published in the Wakonse Arizona E-Newsletter [Volume 2, number 2, 2004]
Web URL: http://clte.asu.edu/wakonse/ENewsletter/comics_feature.htm

Using Humor in the Classroom
In this article I remind instructors to take a step back, and examine some basic teaching principles that can help reinvigorate the joy in teaching and learning, with a particular emphasis on the use of comics and toys in the classroom setting. Humor, and toys draw our attention, in part, because they resonate with interests and ways in which people think. Comics and amusing stories that relate to topics being taught can serve to both focus student attention and reiterate important class concepts. Toys can serve as memory beacons, adding a positive association to the topic being learned.

The Balanced Teaching Model

Balanced Teaching
To begin, it is clear that due to vast differences in course topics and teaching styles, there is not a simple universal prescribed method to enhance the learning environment. We each differ in our situation, constraints and teaching agendas, so naturally some of the present advice concerning humor will not apply to all. What is common is that we as teachers have the opportunity and potential to inspire students and change their lives if we can achieve a balance between our chosen topic, our method of presentation, and our own passions about knowledge.

Shown to the left is a Venn diagram indicating three regions of material that could be presented to students. The top circle labeled “Truth” represents the standard material associated with a course topic. Typically there is much more potential material than can realistically be covered. The left circle labeled “PR” indicates potentially relevant methods of communicating material to students. As is diagrammed, many effective teaching instruments simply do not apply to a given course. Finally, the circle to the right labeled “You” indicates the personal passions and talents of the instructor. The goal of the balanced teaching model is to try and optimize one’s teaching as much as possible by choosing course material and presentation methods that are within the intersection of these three regions. The intersection area is drawn as a hexagonal shape as a way of indicating that instructors should try and extend this region as much as possible. Usage of humor and toys is one way to accomplish this. For best effect, one simply needs to make sure that such items meet the three requirements of being relevant to the course, effective communication enhancements, and comfortable to the instructor.
Collecting and Cataloguing Materials

The actual collection of toys, comics, and humorous stories is straightforward. One method is to visit toy, science, and book stores and roam the isles thinking creatively about how you might use items. Good generic books for comics include single-frame comics like the *Far Side*, and *Herman*. For comics one can also regularly peruse the newspaper funnies, or magazines known for their humor like the *New Yorker*. There are also numerous web sites that have extensive selections, such as <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/style/comics> and <http://www.kingfeatures.com/features/comics/comics.htm>.

Another approach is to offer extra credit to students who bring in comics or interesting news stories that are relevant to your class. Similarly, in some classes you can assign demonstration projects instead of papers, and often the students will allow you to keep their projects to share with future classes. Once you have begun a collection of comics and toys, you should organize and file them into sub-categories so that it is easier to find material when you are in a hurry later on. For comics that are applicable to multiple categories, you can make several copies and file them in several places.

Usage Tips for Humor and Toys

Tips on using comics and toys extend from the balanced teaching model. In short, the items should be relevant, amusing, and something with which the instructor is comfortable. Some comics are quite funny but irrelevant to the course material. Usage of these can be distracting and appear disingenuous. Others are relevant but simply not funny, like the fellow below espousing mathematical formulas. There are enough comics that are both relevant and amusing that you should be able to accomplish both demands. Many comics make fun of either the instructor or the course material. Potentially self-derogatory comics like the “Eraser Fight” one shown above are typically very well received. They humanize professors and communicate potential playfulness regarding issues that students might otherwise view as tedious. Along the same vein, one should be careful when using comics that are potentially derogatory to students. Making fun of poor student performance can come across as mean spirited, and hard on those students who often need the most support. A possible exception is when discussing cheating or other unacceptable behavior. The “F in History” comic to the left is one that
should not be used indiscriminately, but could, for example, be useful when discussing policy regarding cheating. It also goes without saying to avoid sexist, racist, or otherwise potentially offensive humor; there is enough clean material available without needing to go there. Other presentation tips include to make sure the comic is large, avoid verbose or long multiple-frame comics, feel free to add captions that help clarify how a comic relates to the topic at hand, and always read the comic text to the class (helping out those who may have difficulty seeing it).

Effective toys include ones that are either big enough that they can be seen from the front by the entire class, or small and sturdy enough that they can be passed around. I have used toys at every level including difficult graduate classes such as inferential statistics. Legos, for example, can be used to demonstrate a variety of mathematical principles. Remember that part of the purpose of using toys is simply to get the students in an amused and relaxed, but attentive state of mind.

**Be a Good Roll Model**

Finally, remember that you are a role model that students can admire and strive to be like. Usage of a balanced teaching approach in which you integrate course material, effective communication techniques, and your own personal humor and talents will not only enhance your teaching performance, but will reaffirm to students that learning can be joyful.

---

**Mike McBeath** is Director of the Cognition and Behavior Program and an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Arizona State University. He teaches primarily in the areas of Perception and Human Factors, and does research exploring fun things like how people, animals, and robots figure out where to run to catch balls. He became a Wakonse fellow this year, and presented a session on the topic of using humor and toys in the classroom that is the basis of this article. He can be reached at m.m@asu.edu or (480) 965-8930, and his web page is at <http://www.public.asu.edu/~mmcbeath>.