

Phi Delta Kappa – Toronto Chapter

Winning Entry for the Jackman Award 2005

written by

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As a concurrent science and education student, my first education assignment (4 years ago) was to write a teaching philosophy as a brief reflective essay highlighting an understanding of how students learn and how instruction can best assist that learning. Looking back to my earlier philosophy and comparing it to my current philosophy I found one clear common thread in enhancing learning: humour.

According to Grierson (1986) resistance to learning can melt in the face of humour. It is intrinsically motivating. Humour captures learners with its novelty, conflict and challenge. It stimulates both brain hemispheres, coordinates the senses and produces a level of consciousness that brings “the brain is at it fullest capacity” (p.6). Berk and Nanda (1998) confirm that humour causes the brain’s reticular activating system to allow access to higher order function. As they put it, humour thaws brain freeze when taking tests. Coderre (1991) states that students learn and remember up to five times more when they are involved and smiling.

e.e. Cummings once said, “The most wasted of all days is one without laughter”, I couldn’t agree more. Working in an elementary school for the past three years has opened my eyes to how important humour is to the student/teacher relationship and the learning environment. Right from the morning eye opener you can tell who had a good morning and who did not. The littlest things, like not eating their favourite cereal for breakfast can change your normally cheerful student to be less attentive. At these times and always it is teacher’s turn to start the day off with a smile and show them that school today will be much better than their morning at home. Starting the day with a smile, humour or laughter builds relationships and brings us closer to our students.

I’ll describe a scenario for you, that of my first day of supply teaching. I was called into emergency supply as the city was in a huge rut and the principal was desperate for a teacher. I walked into the classroom, terrified and uncertain of my skills. The students looked just as nervous as I felt, and I sensed they knew I had never done this before. The class was settled, and working quietly as the principal left me alone with them. I began to take the long walk from the teacher’s desk in the back of the room, to the chalkboard at the front to take attendance and explain to the students who I was, and then I did it; I tripped on the overhead projector cord. The class fell silent, not knowing what to do. Should they laugh, should they ask if I’m ok or worst of all, should they remain silent? I however couldn’t hold it in, so I laughed which resulted in an

uproar (a controlled uproar of course) of student laughter. I'm not sure if it was laughter of relief or that they thought it was funny that I tripped. Nonetheless, the rest of our day was like nothing I could have written in a book of perfect first days. It was like there was this silent understanding. It was ok to smile and to laugh as long as they were being appropriate and not disruptive while their peers or I was talking. In fact, I had a student who was notoriously known around the school to not take any notes or pay attention in class, participating and doing work while I was instructing. At the end of the day the students were asking me if their teacher was coming back the next day and if so if I could be their teacher anyways.

In closing, I'll never be sure that my "trip" in the morning was the reason for my great day or even if it was a factor at all, but I will always believe that it was because humour can bond a class. This leads to adjusting my philosophy to make humour and creativity a viable part of every class. In fact, I hope to make everyday a science experiment complete with a Purpose, Hypothesis, Procedure, Materials and Conclusion. As my teaching philosophy now reads: my Purpose for each day is to make my students want to come to my class and learn; my Hypothesis is that they will as long as I keep their faith in me as a teacher and that I teach with a light heart and a huge smile; my Procedure will be to start each day smiling, forgetting any disruptions or misbehaviours from the previous day, attending to learning of each student; my Materials will always come straight from my heart and my head; and, of course my Conclusion will be to smile and laugh with each student every day.

References:

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