

Humour, Music and Creativity

'There they lie, the nursery rhymes, so much at the back of our minds that we can't remember when we first learned them. What did they give us, so long ago? A suggestion that mishaps might be funny rather than tragic, that tantrums can be comical as well as frightening, and that laughter is the cure for practically everything.'

Iona Opie on the Mother Goose rhymes

Some time ago, I attended a day's training on creativity with the physicist, Kevin Byron. As the day went on, he introduced various tools for generating creative thinking such as turning things on their head and forcing things together that are normally thought of separately. It occurred to me that these are the things that comedians do to make us laugh.

It's impossible to imagine any social gathering without the sound of laughter. A sense of humour is a fundamental aspect of our being and it's not just us – animals seem to get the funny side of life too.¹ Many scientists believe that human laughter evolved from the panting that apes make when involved in play fighting – it signifies there is no real harm intended. Even rats make a sound when tickled. Jeffrey Burgdorf, the scientist who studies this phenomenon, stops short of describing this as laughter but calls it 'a sign of positive affect'.

Humour as a subject is vast and many-faceted. I am not offering a comprehensive survey. This article draws on my experience teaching music and having jam sessions with children in primary and nursery schools, during which I have found humour to be helpful with:

- focussing attention
- switching the focus of attention from narrow and detailed to the wider context
- generating a shared sense of wellbeing
- encouraging children to:
 - take an active role in their learning rather than being passive receivers of information
 - think creatively

The 'Aha' moment – humour and learning

Everyone experiences a burst of pleasure that goes with a sudden dawning of understanding. We call it the 'aha' or 'eureka' moment and talk of light bulbs going on in our heads.²

The pleasure we take in the moments of insight that come from jokes and puzzles shows us how humour plays a part in our inborn attraction to learning.

Very often, humour works by bouncing us into a new way of understanding. When Groucho Marx said he refused to join a club that would have someone like him as a member, he was potentially educating us about an aspect of human psychology.

Many jokes, however, simply foster a general ability to hold more than one point of view in mind like a juggler keeping many balls in the air at once.

One of my favourite nonsense jokes is:

*Why are there no aspirins in the jungle?
Because the parrots-eat-em-all (Paracetamol)*

This is a sound of language joke. There is a burst of pleasure as we 'get' it. At the same time, it is an exercise, strengthening our ability to see things from different angles. There is a kind of sense lurking within the nonsense.

Music, humour, learning and sociability

Spike Milligan is one of several comedians who point out the similarity between music and comedy.

The common ground is partly in the rules of conversation. Both rely on:

- precise timing
- a shared pulse and tempo
- turn-taking
- repetition with variation

Impressionists make us laugh by reproducing an exaggerated replica of the prosody, or musical aspects, of their target's speech. This is a heightened version of the mimesis or copying that is one of the crucial aspects of learning.

Children instinctively copy in order to grow and join with the rest of the human race. It is a subtle unconscious process that also happens in apprenticeship where the student spends time with the teacher and picks up not just the tricks of the trade but a way of being in relation to the task.

Here is one of my favourite 'language as pure sound' jokes:

Harold Wilson (insert your favourite or least favourite politician here) is in the bath and his butler, Wardle, is tidying up when Harold breaks wind.

Wardle disappears, returns a few minutes later with a hot water bottle and throws it into the bath.

'What's this for, Wardle?' says Harold.

Wardle replies, 'You just said, "What-about-a-hot-water-bottle-Wardle?"'

For me, this joke encapsulates the joy of the musicality of language and connects to our deeply embedded, childlike amusement at anything scatological.

It reminds me of a remark in the novel, *Galapagos*, by Kurt Vonnegut.

A small remnant of the human species stranded on a desert island after a global catastrophe evolves into a sea-lion like species over a period of a million years...

'And people still laugh about as much as they ever did, despite their shrunken brains. If a bunch of them are lying around on a beach and one of them farts, everybody else laughs and laughs, just as people would have done a million years ago.'

In many ways, laughter provides similar benefits to musicality in our social interactions. It is a kind of lubricant, smoothing over awkwardness, shyness and even hostility by easing communication and enabling a sense of shared wellbeing.

When we see a group of people meeting for any kind of gathering, there will be laughter. Social scientists observing groups tell us that nobody has to say anything particularly hilarious for everyone to laugh.³ People are just showing that they are glad to be there in that company and ready to be friendly.

This is partly a musical communication, vocalising without words. The togetherness of the group will also be seen in how their body language co-ordinates in a shared pulse, a kind of dance. Everyone enjoys being funny and a healthy group will let all the members have their chance to get a laugh and share a joke. As educators, we can encourage an ethos where everyone gets their moment in the sun.

Humour works when we are alone too – we can literally make a better life for ourselves by seeing the funny side when things go wrong and this is a habit we can acquire through practice.

Children spontaneously make each other laugh from a very early age.⁴ Many gatherings, sporting, political, social and religious deliberately use music to harmonise the group and, of course, anyone working with young children will have a repertoire of songs, rhymes and games to help make the day go enjoyably for everyone.

Many of the early years' classics have comedy elements such as the slow crescendo countdown followed by the ecstatic lift-off in *Zoom Zoom Zoom* or funny/scary elements like the BOO! in the *Bogeyman* rhyme.⁵

It's easy to see how these follow the pattern of tension and release so fundamental in classic jokes.

It is entirely natural and desirable for us to use music and shared movement to promote all aspects of children's wellbeing and cognitive development but it makes a big difference HOW we do it.

There are examples of the overuse of these things for social control. Think about those mass demonstrations of manufactured fervour in North Korea and see this video for how the indoctrination starts early:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPTL5GGPEPQ>

This is not to criticise East and South-East Asian music teaching, which reflects a very different cultural ethos and set of values, but rather to ask how we encourage children to be both team players and independent thinkers – which brings us to...

The deliberate mistake

*'We all operate in two contrasting modes, which might be called open and closed... we must return to the open mode, because in that mode we are the most aware, most receptive, most creative, and therefore at our most intelligent.'*⁸

John Cleese

We are chanting the rhyme, *Three Little Birds*, holding up three fingers to be the little birds:

*Three little birds all fast asleep
One little bird says, 'Tweet tweet tweet
Tweet tweet tweet – tweet tweet tweet'*

*Down comes the mummy with a big fat crumb
And one little bird says, 'Yum yum yum
In my tum – thank you, Mum'*

After the first verse, I hold up two fingers and say, 'Now there are four birds left'. If nobody challenges this, it means they are all asleep but, so far, that has never happened. Someone or several children shout out with glee or consternation, 'No, it's two birds!' I say, 'Oh yes, so it is' and on we go. It is a small moment but it has three important effects:

- It provides an opportunity for the children to be 'right', reversing the teacher/taught dynamic and giving them a chance to contribute and be the teacher.
- It wakes everyone up so that they are more actively involved in what is happening. You can be sure that when it comes to the next verse, everyone is watching and listening carefully to see if I make a mistake again.
- It provides a moment of joy which, of course, is a very important motivating element in any kind of session.
- It stimulates critical thinking*

In addition to the benefits above, the mistake can also be a lovely way of communicating with children who are disengaged for various reasons such as shyness or fury at having been abandoned by their parents.

One big issue for nursery schools and reception classes in particular is easing the transition from home to the setting or school. Of course, music plays a very important part in bringing children and staff together in a shared enjoyment of singing, dancing, rhymes and games. I have noticed, though, that in many cases where children are unwilling to engage with anyone or anything in a setting, humour can break the spell.

In one nursery where there is a music area, I will be set up and making music as the children arrive. There is often a tricky time as some children are unwilling to be left by their carer but in most cases, this is short-lived and the children quickly become absorbed in nursery life when the carer has gone.

In just one example, a child was left sitting on the side refusing to respond to kind words and encouragement. We were singing songs that the children requested. Some were dancing, others were playing rhythm sticks and instruments. New songs were introduced, still no response from our silent watcher. We sang *Twinkle Twinkle* at someone's request and when we got to 'Like a diamond in the sky', I

sang, 'Like a banana in the sky'. This produced a flicker of a smile and as the session went on with more judiciously placed 'mistakes', the smile widened. The shell had been cracked.

At the same time, the moment that banana was mentioned, a child who was busy in the nearby home corner popped up and called 'It's not a banana!'

Fostering flexibility

There is a very interesting thing about children's different responses to the deliberate mistake. Some children are very keen to have the 'right words' while others embrace the opportunity to innovate and immediately start coming up with all kinds of variations. In the case of the banana in the *Twinkle* song, it starts with different fruits. Then I might throw in another category, dinosaurs or vegetables, so then we are sharing a session improvising with language and categories – what's not to like?

Now let's turn our attention to the children who insist on the right words. We will all have met children who tend to be over-literal or narrowly focussed, even obsessive, and who have difficulty accepting any deviation from routine. There is more literature on the subject at the pathological end of the continuum but that is outside the scope of this article.⁹

This familiar joke illustrates the diagnostic role of humour – nailing a human foible and describing it in a memorable way:

A man is walking down the road with a dog on a lead and meets a woman coming the other way. 'Does your dog bite?' she asks. 'No,' says the man. She bends down to stroke the hound, who bites her on the hand. 'I thought you said your dog doesn't bite!' she cries. 'It's not my dog,' he replies.

Being over-literal, too rule-based and unable to accept change are significant barriers to learning and functioning. For the more rigid thinkers, I believe humour is vital in fostering a more flexible attitude to learning and to life in general. Most children, wherever they are on the continuum, will gradually learn to take a more creative approach when adults give them permission to be funny and break the rules.

Of course, we all have a nerdy side and it is very useful for many things. The point is to be able to switch modes appropriately and having a sense of humour is one of the better ways of cultivating that ability.

Storyland

The idea of Storyland is another tool for helping children access their creative side.

Most people implicitly understand Storyland to be a place where the normal rules don't apply, where we can experiment freely without immediate real-world consequences.

Some children don't come to this understanding so easily and may need to be brought to it explicitly.

Sitting with a group of nursery children one day, we were about to dive into the imaginary water of a warm tropical lagoon to make watery sounds and chant the rhyme set, *Deep in the Deep/Oceanology*.¹⁰

Everyone had already been saying what animal they were and there was the usual selection of cats, unicorns and dolphins and a superhero (children being in control of their choice of character was more important at this particular moment than me teaching the children about categories).

One boy who was particularly literal and change-averse had chosen to be a bee. He refused to take the plunge, saying firmly, 'Bees can't swim'.

So we talked about how Storyland is a place where things can be different from the real world. He really got it and then joined in happily under the sea.

I felt that he had made a valuable shift although, of course, it was just one stride in an ongoing journey for him.

To be teasing

To be teasing is a social skill. The anthropologists tell us it is common across different cultures. If we can allow ourselves to be teased, we can step out of the bubble of our own preoccupations and see ourselves as others see us.¹¹

Of course, we need to use extreme care and sensitivity when teasing or using any humorous technique. Humour is often cruel or belittling and can inhibit precisely the flexibility and lateral modes of consciousness that I am seeking to encourage.

It always comes down to:

- observing children's reactions so we can tell if we have gone too far
- laughing with rather than at
- knowing when to stop or shift emphasis

The particular role that the adult has and the ethos of the setting will also make a difference to what is appropriate – a visiting artist has considerably more leeway to generate the chaos that hilarity can induce than, for instance, a reception teacher. A key worker will be in a better position to really know each child and have more time to enjoy shared play.

We have a number of techniques in our communication toolbox and it is our job to develop an instinct for when and how to use them, moment by moment.

Occasionally, while teaching music to large groups of unruly children, I have heard myself saying, 'That's not funny' and had to correct myself, saying, 'Well, it is funny but now is not the time'.

Trig's Broom – encapsulating ideas and paradoxes

Trig, from the popular TV series, *Only Fools and Horses*, tells people in the café that he's had the same broom for twenty years. When Del Boy asks him if he's ever used it, because it still looks fairly new, he replies that it's had seventeen new heads and fourteen new handles. Sid, the café owner, asks how it can still be the same broom.

This paradox is one that has exercised philosophers for millennia. Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato and Plutarch all debated whether The Ship of Theseus, which has all its parts replaced over time, remains the same ship.¹² The joke is telling us something about how the world is. It can, if we let it, lead to speculation about the relationship between the whole of something and its parts.¹³

The philosophical nourishment will not strike us if we stay on the surface, satisfied with the initial buzz of hilarity that is, of course, one of the main reasons we love comedy. Our first reaction is to laugh at Trig's stupidity. There is a Superiority Theory of humour¹⁵ that suggests we laugh at people when we feel superior to them and that makes us feel better about ourselves. All the 'Land of Fools'¹⁶ jokes can be seen to fit this rather narrow theory and Trig performs the function beautifully in *Only Fools and Horses*.

We will need to go beyond the first reaction for the interesting ideas about how the world works to come to mind. This often happens over time as we notice resonances and connections with our experience.

The same is true when it comes to the potential for the insights afforded by 'Land of Fools' jokes to help us know ourselves and sidestep some of the errors that come from jumping to conclusions and failure to see our own biases for just a start. First of all, we need to see that the joke may be about us and not all the other idiots out there:

A man went to see the psychotherapist. He was wearing a flying jacket, Bermuda shorts and snowshoes and had streaky bacon wrapped round his ears. He shuffled into the consulting room and said, 'I've come to see you about my brother.'

It was my brother who told me that joke!

In conclusion

We want our children to enjoy taking an active role in their learning and become flexible and creative thinkers. Developing a sense of humour, both ours and theirs, is one of the best ways of making that happen. Above all, perhaps, we need to do it with a light touch because, as William Blake put it:

*'He who tries to bind to himself a joy
Does the wingèd life destroy.'*

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¹ Do animals have a sense of humour? Peter McGraw and Joel Warner – Life 27 March 2014

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25312-do-animals-have-a-sense-of-humour/#>

² The Aha! Moment: The Science Behind Creative Insight

<https://brainworldmagazine.com/aha-moment-science-behind-creative-insight/>

³ Robert Provine, a psychologist from the University of Maryland, found that we actually laugh most when talking to our friends. In fact, we're 30 times more likely to laugh at something when we are with other people.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232489851_Laughter_A_Scientific_Investigation

⁴ Communicative Musical Funniness – Charlotte Arculus

https://www.academia.edu/802144/Communicative_Musical_Funniness

⁵ Hear Steve's recording of Bogeyman at <https://stevegrocott.bandcamp.com/track/bogey-man>

Cecilia Delatori (comedian/educator) writes about the songs on my Sparks CDs:

'On the subject of comedy, what's nice about doing these songs and dances is there are lots of comic/ridiculous/fun/silly elements to some words, stories and actions within the structure. So I find there's a looseness and freedom you don't get in other subjects. I enjoy doing it more than anything else in a school setting. It's fun and uplifting and nursery children will walk away if it isn't.'

⁸ See John Cleese on open and closed modes of thinking – <http://www.gurteen.com/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/L004957/>

⁹ E.g. Implicit Learning Impairments in Autism Spectrum Disorders – Implications for Treatment – Laura Grofer Klinger, Mark R. Klinger and Rebecca L. Pohlig <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.469.2670&rep=rep1&type=pdf#page=78>

¹⁰ Hear a recording of *Deep in the Deep/Oceanology* <https://stevegrocott.bandcamp.com/track/deep-in-the-deep-oceanology>

¹¹ The Educative Value of Teasing
What exactly is teasing, and what are its purposes? Peter Gray PhD <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/freedom-learn/201301/the-educative-value-teasing-0?amp>

¹² I am grateful to Gary Strachan in his blog, *The Paradox of Trigger's Broom*, for pointing out the connection.

¹³ There is an extensive literature on this topic attempting to describe the two differing modes of consciousness that apprehend on one hand; details, static snapshots of a topic, numerical ratios etc and on the other; the whole, ever-changing lived experiences, metaphor etc. This possibly over-binary but in my experience, extremely useful way of seeing things is framed in different ways by different thinkers e.g.

- Hot and cold cognition Asma S (2017) *The Evolution of Imagination*
- *Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow* – Daniel Kahneman
- Left brain right brain theory – McGilchrist, I (2009) *The Master and his Emissary*.
- The whole and the parts Bortoft, H (2012) *Taking Appearance Seriously*

The quotation from John Cleese above also addresses this point. Many people, myself included, feel that our education and culture are unhelpfully biased towards the analytical, theoretical, detailed way of understanding the world and need to shift towards the practical and wholistic.

¹⁵ *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* – Noel Carrol

¹⁶ Jokes that pick on nationalities or groups like 'dumb blondes' can usefully be reframed as 'Land of Fools' jokes and we can choose to react to them by preening ourselves on our superior intelligence or by seeing echoes of our own behaviour.