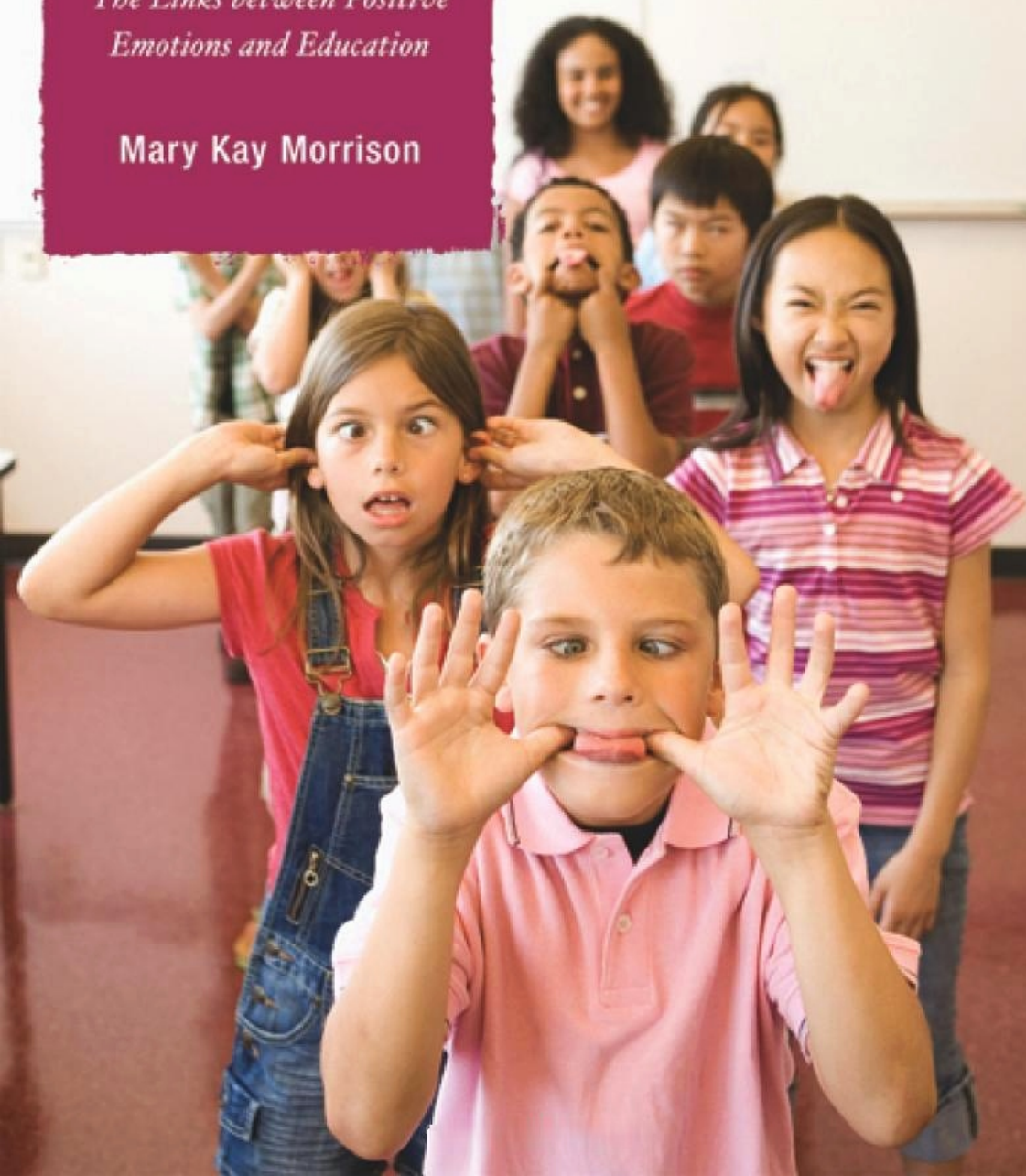


USING HUMOR TO MAXIMIZE LEARNING

*The Links between Positive
Emotions and Education*

Mary Kay Morrison



U S I N G H U M O R T O M A X I M I Z E L E A R N I N G

**The Links between
Positive Emotions and Education**

Mary Kay Morrison

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In loving memory of my father, Bill Wiltz, whose laughter affected the lives of all he touched, especially his sweet cookie: my mother, Ruth Wiltz.

To my loving husband, Don Morrison, who has inspired, encouraged, supported, and loved me. To our children, their spouses, and our precious grandchildren, who enrich our lives with their love: William, Jennifer, Ben, Tyler, Emma, Andy, Julie, Andrew, Mimi, Rachael, Jason, Katie, Peter, Val, Samuel, Christine, Jennifer, and Beth.

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PREFACE

Several years ago I attended the Humor Project's 17th Annual International Conference. Joel Goodman, founder of the project, presented a "Humor in Action: Making a Difference" award to Michael Christensen, the man who founded "Clowns on Rounds." Working in children's hospital wards, these clowns promote healing through humor and laughter. Preceding this presentation was a film clip of these big-hearted clowns interacting with children in an intensive care unit. During the celebration, the comment was made that *where there are children, there should be laughter*. It hit me that I couldn't remember the last time I was in a school and heard much laughter. This was my "aha" moment.

A decade of observations, interviews, and facilitation of workshops coinciding with a passionate interest in brain research have intensified my quest for the connection between humor and learning. This search has allowed me to network with numerous professionals in the medical field. While educators involved in humor research can occasionally be found at the university level, compelling data is emerging in numerous studies from the medical field linking humor, health, and cognitive connections. The opportunity I have had to network and learn from professionals at American Association of Therapeutic Humor conferences, the Humor Conference, and the National Wellness Conference, as well as

numerous education conferences, has broadened the scope of this investigation.

People usually choose education as a career because they want to make a difference in the lives of kids. Many find this increasingly difficult. Humor is an overlooked natural resource that can play a crucial role in creating a healthy learning environment, but there is very little written about using humor to meet the escalating challenges that confront educators.

Neuroscience is in the primitive stages of development. The exploding rate of research makes it difficult for even the most committed teacher to stay abreast of this growing knowledge base. Even so, an abundance of research supports the benefits of an enriched learning environment.

Traditionally we do not attend to the brain's biological needs that shape *how* we learn. Learning is nurtured by trusted relationships, strengthened by change, and challenged by the chaos of life. Yet the brains of the children entrusted to us in our schools are required to function in a system that is linear, data-driven, and results-oriented. Thinking is not a valued skill. Standardized tests are given to compare and rank the learning of students. Parents are provided with report cards and letter grades. Except for A students, grades are meant to point out deficits as the way to motivate students to "improve."

This book began during a conversation I had with a colleague about the increasing stress we observed in education. I joked that instead of school improvement, we needed *humor improvement*. As the professional development consultant for leadership in an Illinois regional office of education, I've had immeasurable opportunities to talk with educators. Their frustrations with legislation, bureaucratic paperwork, unfunded mandates, and accountability have created intense anxiety. My initial Humor Improvement Workshops were designed to focus on stress management strategies. In reality, the initial workshops stressed *me*! I lay awake at night wondering if anyone would even attend an all-day session on humor—after all, these administrators and teachers had many more important things to do. How could they find the time to attend with all of the other crucial issues on their plate? If they did come, would they laugh at me, label me "cutesy," and challenge the importance of the topic?

Educators have continued to come to my workshops, and increasingly they request more information about humor. My knowledge has increased along with my confidence. I have learned from their questions, their experiences, and their fears. I have also learned why I was so afraid. Humor is difficult: It is difficult to define and difficult to practice. It is especially difficult to integrate into most school cultures.

The feedback I have received from the workshops has allowed me to reflect on these questions:

- ☺ How can we use humor to improve the morale in our school?
- ☺ What are some practical suggestions on how to incorporate humor in the classroom?
- ☺ Is it safe to use humor with my students only when no one else is around? How can the culture change to support humor?
- ☺ What is humor, really: nature or nurture?
- ☺ What is the connection for individuals between humor and learning?
- ☺ Can purposeful humor impact learning systems? If so, how?
- ☺ What can be done about negative people who inhibit humor?

Cognitive research continues to clarify my thinking. My focus on humor has broadened from an isolated concept to *mission possible*. We can use humor to create a joyful environment for learning, where humor is not only valued but also an integral component of student learning.

I addressed my own fears by facing the frequent negative reactions to ice-breakers, playful activities, and games. I encountered responses like: “well that may be OK for the elementary grades, but this is certainly not appropriate at our *higher* levels of instruction.” Warnings about being too energetic, cutesy, and having too much fun have continued throughout my journey.

My fears have given me insight into all who value humor but are also afraid. The positive responses of educators have ignited my passion for infusing fun into a system that is drowning in the poisons of fear, stress, blame, and punitive measures. I am on a quest to fill the humor void in schools with laughter and fun. This can be accomplished by encouraging further research on the relationship of humor and learning, by being aware of the benefits of humor for all learners (both teachers and

students), and by writing a book about what I have learned from a decade of facilitating workshops on humor. We are stuck in a system that ignores what we have gleaned from cognitive science. Our emotions are at the very core of the human experience of learning. The purpose of this book is to explore the links between humor, an optimal learning environment, and the emerging cognitive research on humor development and practice. My purpose is to encourage educators to reach a joy-flow synergy level (see chapter 2) with energy, passion, enthusiasm, and humor as an integral part of their teaching experience. The goal of this book is to ignite the passion of the cultural architects of education to persist in crafting a safe, joyful learning environment filled with *humergy*, the energy of humor.

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Chapter I

HUMOR—THE TONIC FOR TIRED EDUCATORS

“Never take life too seriously, you won’t get out alive.”

Have you been exhausted, worried, or just plain weary lately? Has the current focus on accountability, data, and unfunded mandates made you irritable? This is your lucky day! Step right up for a sure-fire remedy guaranteed to bring vitality and energy to your teaching. Be prepared to be amazed by the advantages of the humor tonic. But be warned: humor is more than the snake-oil skill of telling jokes. Also be warned that the research contained here focuses on many preliminary findings and could be biased toward the positive benefits of humor. My focus in this book has been to search for the advantages to educators who want to increase humor in their lives. I admit it. I am prejudiced toward the idea that humor is just the tonic needed by educators. So the reviewed studies are presented through my rosy and optimistic lens.

If you want to add a little fun to your teaching, this book is for you! Humor is the real thing. It cures No Child Left Behind blues. It knocks the socks off any bored student. It tickles, splits guts, and generates bellyaches while curing whatever ails you. It might even be

funny. Just take a peek at what a healthy dose of humor might do for you! Just a spoonful:

1. Contributes to Mind/Body Balance

“Worrying is like a rocking chair: it gives you something to do, but it doesn’t get you anywhere.”

A sense of humor can create a remarkable feeling of control. Learning to use humor as a lens for life challenges can increase your confidence in your own internal ability to adapt. The optimistic energy that comes from humor will enable you to embrace difficulties with resilience. Some people purposefully use laughter to ease pain and promote physical healing. There is some experimental research indicating that laughter and humor might actually cure illness and provide effective therapies for numerous disorders. Some claim that laughter relieves pain, reduces stress, and improves the immune system response (Harvey, 1998). Although these studies are preliminary and no firm conclusions can be made yet, many of the findings are encouraging about the benefits and applications of positive humor.

Got stress? The purposeful use of humor can help you feel more optimistic about your life, knowing that you can choose how to respond to stress. Humor elevates mood and has been known to be a deterrent to depression. Stress reduction is considered one of the most important benefits of humor. A little humor will go a long way in helping educators balance the current focus on accountability, testing, standards, and unfunded mandates.

2. Maximizes Brain Power

“If you haven’t got a sense of humor, you haven’t any sense at all.”

—Mary McDonald

Humor has the ability to capture the attention of the brain. “Emotion drives attention and attention drives learning” (Sylwester, 1995). Our brain cannot learn if it is not attending. The surprise elements of humor alert the attentional center of the brain and increase the likelihood of

memory storage and long term retrieval. Humor has the potential to hook easily bored and inattentive students. It can help the stressed or shy student to relax. As brain food, humor can't be beat.

Word play, puns, stories, jokes, and riddles all involve the creative use of language. Maximizing our capacity to use language through the skillful use of humor will increase the number and speed of the neural connections in the brain. Humor is often used as an indicator for the identification of gifted students.

Just how effective can humor be? The marketing industry gives us an indication. I must confess that I usually watch the Super Bowl just to see the commercials. The money spent for air-time is mind-boggling. Advertisers have less than two minutes to get your attention and put their product into your long-term memory and they spend zillions of dollars to capture the attention of this large viewing audience. Not only do people watch these commercials, but the next day, animated discussion about favorite Super Bowl commercials takes place around office watercoolers. There is a good reason for humor in advertising. An analysis of the retention rate for commercials found that the highest rate of recall was when humor was used (Stewart & Furse, 1986).

3. Enhances Creativity

"Civilization had too many rules for me, so I did my best to rewrite them."

—Bill Cosby

Creativity is the ability of the brain to bring together diverse ideas that will generate the thinking necessary for complex problem solving. Humor and creativity are great companions, each a perfect complement for the other in nourishing thinking. Risk-taking is the nucleus of creativity and of humor; the freedom to express wild ideas activates spirited conversation and sparks the imagination. The creative process flourishes when accompanied by a sense of humor.

Humor increases the potential for divergent thinking and the ability to solve complex problems. By linking previously unconnected areas of the brain, humor forges new associations involving existing concepts. Voila: creativity flourishes.

4. Facilitates Communication

“The person who can bring the spirit of laughter into a room is indeed blessed.”

—Bennett Cerf

Using humor to build and maintain relationships is an invaluable skill. Emotional intelligence (EI), the ability to perceive, assess, and influence one’s own and other people’s emotions is essential for knowing when and how to use humor effectively (Goleman, 1998). The ability to use humor as a part of interpersonal dialogue requires confidence in one’s own humor strengths, a fun-loving playful spirit, and the willingness to risk the extraordinary.

Humor generates trust among colleagues and can facilitate a reduction in tension, fear, and anger. Leaders who have the ability to assist others in seeing the “humor” in difficult situations can nurture communication and ease tense situations. Exaggeration, puns, and self-deprecating humor are tools of the trade. Humorists are able to use reframing (example: the ridiculous or exaggeration) as a device to facilitate a shift in context. This shift encourages both individuals and groups to think creatively through shared humor. Laughter can quickly dispel tension and increase the capacity for dialogue.

The use of humor as a tool in communication is rarely taught. It is a skill requiring multifaceted levels of knowledge and ability. Purposeful humor integration provides a distinct advantage in conversation.

5. Supports the Change Process

“Nothing new should be done for the very first time.”

There are volumes written about change. Organizational change is a hot topic for school leaders. Whether we encounter everyday small disruptions or a major crisis situation, the way we respond to change varies greatly among individuals and organizations.

Humor can be an indicator of how we are responding to change. It is similar to taking the temperature of an individual or an organization. Our belief systems, our evolved coping skills, our physical being, our tempera-

ment, our experiences, our culture, and our gender all combine within our individual neurological system and are all involved in generating our individual response to change. The humor response of any group is a reflection of organizational thinking and can reflect the ability of that culture to adapt.

Our brains crave familiar patterns. We recognize what school bells mean. We understand report cards and grading systems. We are used to a certain structure, procedure, and routine in education. However education has faced increasing pressure from a variety of stakeholders and the demands for accountability have challenged the very core of our system. Change happens frequently, but teachers have an amazing ability to find humor when faced with adversity. Here are some humorous responses from teachers to difficult situations:

- ☺ All teachers must now stay in their rooms until 4:15 p.m. Teachers caught leaving early will be trained in CRAB (criteria referenced abstract bologna).
- ☺ In order to combat obesity, the amount of food in the school lunch will decrease. A price increase of \$2 is necessary to implement this change.
- ☺ Research shows that students need more sleep, so homeroom teachers are asked to monitor the amount of sleep their students get. Several teachers have volunteered to sleep during their class period.

Most of us experience unexpected change, suffering, and loss in our lives. When we are able to find the humor in a situation, we can begin to heal and move ahead. Painful experiences, if met with hope and optimism, can produce remarkable growth opportunities. In fact, humor frequently emerges from the downside of our lives. Laughter and tears are closely related, which is why many comedians began their careers by laughing through the tragedy in their lives. This ability for humorous optimism in the face of difficulty is truly a miracle tonic. Change is good—you go first.

6. Creates an Optimal Environment for Teaching and Learning

"You've got to go out on a limb sometimes, because that's where the fruit is."

—Will Rogers