

What's So Damn Funny? The Role of Humor in Identity

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INTRODUCTION

This unit explores the roles of humor in the formation of our individual identity, the role of humor in society and how our individual senses of humor affect the way we are viewed by others. The lessons within this unit explore literature from this perspective. Students are required to think critically and introspectively through activities in reading, writing, viewing and representing. Ultimately, we will reach a better understanding of ourselves.

Throughout history, mankind has expressed humor in the form of laughter, but the sense of humor, as we perceive it today, is a relatively recent invention of psychologists and early social scientists. As society has become increasingly more complex, our sense of humor, as well as our comprehension and appreciation of it, has become similarly complex. One's sense of humor no longer pertains only to one's behavior in festive occasions, but now is a measure of a healthy, well-balanced psyche. Men and women often rate a person's sense of humor as the most important factor in a relationship. Even the medical community has begun to consider seriously the effects of humor on healing. As people are often defined by their senses of humor (or lack thereof), it is important that students recognize the role of humor in social interactions. And yet adolescents whose personal growth is accelerated in all areas including humor, is rarely given guidance in the development of this increasingly important aspect of their personality. What is appropriate and what is not? Why do we laugh? What is funny and why? These are the questions we explore both in literature and in the life around us.

This unit is designed to teach middle school students, grades 6th through 8th, the importance of their sense of humor. Although designed for middle school, it may be easily adapted to accommodate any level of instruction. It is a six week unit, but may be adapted as needed depending on the length of classes, the instructional needs, and the amount of optional readings that are selected.

My Kids

I teach seventh and eighth grade language arts at M.C. Williams Middle School. M.C. Williams is a charter school within the Houston ISD and serves approximately 700 students from northwest Houston. The student population is about 70% African-American, 29% Hispanic and 1% other. The school does not have a lot of the amenities that other schools in our district enjoy, but it does have a dedicated faculty and staff.

My students are basically average middle school students. They laugh and cry, smile and glare, hug and hit. They enjoy social activities more than academic ones. Very few would say they actually enjoy reading; fewer would admit to enjoying writing. They are creative and clever, but not always in ways that are measured by standardized tests. They crave attention and respond warmly to praise and encouragement.

Of course, they're hardly angels. Hurt feelings, usually resulting from playfulness (verbal or physical) that went too far, often end in confrontations and even fights. Adolescent insecurities and maturing emotions shorten reaction times. And every joke is equally likely to bring down the house or bring the house *down*.

Understanding middle school students is a nebulous undertaking. I don't really feel I am qualified to begin such a project. But I know that I am, for better or worse, surrounded by them for seven or so hours every day. 'Might as well enjoy it. Kids love to laugh whether they are 2 or 92. I know I do. So I thought: why not incorporate humor into my lesson delivery. Of course, my personality being what it is, I didn't really have a choice.

Contrary to advice that I had been given when I began teaching just a couple of years ago, the students really responded to my humor. Okay, they thought I was lame, but something in my lame jokes and pervasive puns validated their own emotions and feelings. I found I gained their respect without that being the aim. I had fewer discipline problems, especially with students who tended to be labeled as "problems." And that made me wonder: where does humor belong in education?

Certainly, the students I teach cannot be separated from their individual senses of humor any more than I could my own. I began to watch how the students interacted with each other. I listened to the jokes they made and noted what they laughed at. Overwhelmingly, my students laugh most often at and tell jokes about each other. The socializing effects of this were abundantly clear. It saddened me.

Many of my students were the target of ridicule that most often served to identify group mores regarding things such as pants style, hairstyles, jewelry, shoes, and of course, social behavior. Some of this ridicule, a minority of instances, was good-natured, but more often there was a mean-spiritedness about the comments. But when I attempted to intervene, I was dismissed being told, "I'm just kidding." There were always other seemingly more pressing concerns.

Yet, my students more than many others, by their social nature, need guidance concerning humor to avoid many of the problems we as a school face: violence, truancy, attendance problems, and dropouts. So I embarked on this endeavor to create a unit that might enlighten my students, perhaps raise their awareness and stimulate compassion. That, as an English teacher, I have access to great literature with which to reach the students is a bonus. Will I be able to make them all become lovers of literature? I don't

know. Finding the humor in Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Dickens can't hurt. And as I said: you're there all day, "might as well have fun."

Exploration of Humor

The unit begins with a humor inventory (Appendix A). This is designed to examine the student's sense of humor. Exploring what they find humorous is the only logical starting point. The example inventory I provide with this unit is a working document. Some items may not remain as I identify better inquiry examples. The items that currently appear are ones concerning topics I have witnessed in my classroom or extensions thereof.

Students complete the inventory individually then share their responses in small groups. They are asked to identify similarities and differences between their responses. A cumulative class profile can be created using the data collected with the inventory by simply tallying the number of positive responses to each question. This information can be used throughout the unit to further discussion and reconnect the students' preconceptions to the topics being discussed. Introspection is a vital part of this unit; the students will be challenged to reevaluate their behavior and beliefs as they progress through diverse examples of humor. This introspection continues as the students do other reflective writing and maintain a daily journal of examples of humor they witness. (Appendix B) This forces them to examine their individual senses of humor.

Humor cannot exist in isolation. Freud believed that in all humor there were three participants: the one making the joke, the one hearing the joke and the one the joke is about. This relationship illustrates the highly social and potentially powerful nature of humor. While it is entirely possible to omit the second party in Freud's model by amusing one's self by thought or fantasy, there always remains, the object or butt of the joke. It is this relationship between the one telling the joke, the one hearing the joke and the object of the joke that makes humor a subject worthy of consideration in an educational setting.

Adolescents easily comprehend the subtleties of humor within their peer group. One need only observe a group of teens in any school cafeteria to see the importance humor plays in the group dynamic. Careful observation and identification of the three principal roles as detailed by Freud leads to the inevitable conclusion that humor is a primary socializing tool in adolescence. Humor is used as a tool to define the "in-group" and reinforce group norms by attacking members of the "out-group" and others who exhibit undesired behaviors (Haig, 92). Humor is a socially acceptable means of segregating those we accept from those you do not. Kids at my school get teased regularly on anything from hairstyles and tennis shoes to extracurricular involvement and academic achievement. This generally occurs in the open and goes unchallenged.

Of course, none of this is new. People of all ages have been passing judgments, criticism, chastisement and racism in the form of humor since long before I was born. What may have changed is the consciousness of society in which this humor exists. The

early nineties in Texas heralded this change in consciousness as local politicians and even a gubernatorial candidate found no one was laughing at their insensitive “little jokes” about the naming of Houston’s major airport and the nature of rape. One of our fundamental challenges in this unit is to determine what is and is not appropriate. Undeniably, humor is a social phenomenon; therefore, sociably we will examine it.

The subject of humor has in one form or another been studied since antiquity. For over two thousand years philosophers and physicians pondered the subject. But it took the rise of individualism in the nineteenth century to form it into what we know as a *sense* of humor. It was in this period that one’s ability to laugh at himself, to take a joke and give it back, became a desirable trait (Wickberg, 85). Likewise, the lack of a sense of humor became a debilitating stigma “to be avoided at all costs” (Wickberg, 97). The importance placed on a sense of humor led to increased scholarly examination.

Humor has been divided into numerous elements by countless people for decades. The simplest classification I have found was one by a silent movie director who divided all humor into one of two categories: *Loss of Dignity* and *Mistaken Identity*. Certainly this approach is useful. In the early stages of developing this unit, I toyed with the idea of dividing the unit into these two distinctions. Then I read Arthur A. Berger’s *An Anatomy of Humor*.

Mr. Berger divides humor into four types: Language, Logic, Identity, and Action. Each of these types is further divided into many elements of humor (see Appendix C.) For instance, under Language you will find elements of allusion, irony, ridicule and satire. Under Logic you find elements such as analogy, coincidence, and reversal. Under Identity, examples are eccentricity, exposure and unmasking. Finally, examples of elements from Action include chase and slapstick. These elements will become the language of this unit, to be defined, examined and employed.

Each humor type should be taught early in the unit. In so doing, I would teach two to four elements which may be contained in the humor type. It is important for the student to get a general understanding of these humor types so reflection, analysis and discussion may be more fruitful. I would not teach all of the elements at once (Overload!!!); other elements may be added to the list as they are encountered in the literature of the unit.

In his book, Mr. Berger also paired comic traits with tragic traits (Appendix D.) This pairing is useful to this unit in determining the comic nature of a piece of literature. Many “comedies” aren’t terribly funny, yet they conform to the ideals of comedy. By employing this comparison list, students will be better able to categorize a piece of literature as comic or tragic. Some stories are virtually identical, yet one may be comic and one tragic. The obvious example would be the differing outcomes for the young lovers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Characters, similar in personalities, in similar situation, but wholly contrasting outcomes. Using this list,

students should be able to generate examples from literature and films with which they are familiar.

Justification

Humor is an important topic for adolescents because humor permeates our culture. A successful American is someone with a healthy sense of humor in all situations. He is expected to have appropriate responses whether it is laughing at the chairman's outdated joke during the stressful board meeting, wittily talking his way out of embarrassment or consoling a disappointed spouse. Often our fast paced, media driven culture densely compacts communication with meaning that only humor can unlock. Such communications relies on the individual to interpret the nuances and social contexts, along with physical and vocal subtleties, to complete the transfer of meaning. If we do not prepare students for this communication, a great portion of life will not be accessible to them. Humor, like emotional sensitivity, no longer seems an option for anyone wanting to be accepted in our society.

Adolescents are the perfect audience for this lesson. These students are bursting from their pores to establish their individuality but are still searching for a direction in which to do so. They experiment continuously. As teachers, we often see their experimentation as a nuisance because it frequently manifests itself as disruptive or at least undesired behavior in our classrooms. With so many demands on the educational system and those who endeavor to improve it, the development of a sense of humor in adolescent students is not a high priority. And yet, a healthy sense of humor has shown to be related to self-confidence, happiness, and long relationships; traits we would all like to foster in our own children. So why not in our students?

Finally, by recognizing the relationship between humor in literature, the individual and life itself, the students will have a better understanding of their own identity and relationship to the larger society in which they live. As an English teacher, I labor to have students draw connections between their lives and the literature we read. These connections lay the groundwork for strategic and divergent thinking skills that will help students succeed, not only academically, but also throughout their lives. It will also help students recognize that in a diverse cosmopolitan society, we are all more alike than different; that there may be more human genes than human emotions or motives. This in turn should foster the development of compassion and understanding.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Our literary analysis will follow a fairly formal process. To begin with, students will read the literature (from *Peanuts* to Shakespeare) and attempt to answer some simple questions:

- How funny is this?
- Which types/elements of humor are present here?
- Why do I/don't I find this funny?
- Does this remind me of anything or anyone?

This reflective analysis provides grist for the discussion mill. Some students will inevitably find different things humorous and to different degrees or for different reasons. Certainly, they will make different connections to their lives and the world around them. Most of all, they will be thinking about the literature, the world and themselves.

Comics

To begin with, present the students with a variety of comic strips. Some suggested strips include *Peanuts*, *Family Circus*, *Doonesbury*, *Blondie*, *The Far Side* and *Garfield*. Additionally, *Scholastic* magazine usually has a political cartoon on the last page that is topical on world events. The cartoon is accompanied by analytical questions that I have found useful with students. Using these strips, students identify or rate each one according to the degree of humor they perceive. How funny is this? Once they identify the ones they find humorous, discussion should move to why.

Analysis will inevitably lead to background knowledge and context. Some students will “get” *Doonesbury*, but most probably won't. Students should examine the prerequisite information needed to “get” the humor. The issue of topicality should be addressed at this point. This would be a good point to inject cross-curricular mini-lessons and/or vocabulary. It also teaches the students the analytical skills and procedures they may need when we get to Shakespeare. Maturity also plays a factor in what we as human beings find humorous. Students may respond that they used to find *Peanuts* humorous, but not anymore. When they reach this stage have them examine why their tastes may have changed. It is important that students understand that like so many things in life, one's sense of humor is never static.

One activity within the comic strip portion of the unit which serves as both reflection and assessment can be the drawing of a cartoon. Have the students apply what they have learned by creating humorous cartoons satirizing people or situations at their school. Again, appropriateness of subject should be addressed. Have students share their cartoons which may later be displayed in the classroom, submitted to the school newspaper or compiled into class books.

Essays

The students should at some point in their literary analysis look at the humorous essay. I think Dave Barry works perfectly for this, but you may use any number of writers. Erma Bombeck also comes to mind. Dave Barry is nationally syndicated and very accessible. Students can also use technology, by accessing his editorials online at the Miami Herald's

website (see Internet resources.) Whichever writer you select, the students should apply their analytical formula to the selected essays.

One thing that students will notice right away is that the writer, like the stand-up comedian, usually distorts the simple to the absurd. That is, he takes a single “slice of life” and draws attention to the most minute detail. This too is a comedic attempt to create humor: exaggeration. By placing inappropriate emphasis or importance on such tiny trivialities, the object of the attention becomes exaggerated to the point of the absurd.

More importantly, for our students, is the exploration of why such exaggerations occur and what does the choice of detail say about the writer, the world and us? The answers to these questions will provide much discussion and divergent thinking. But it is vital to the process that students go through the (mental) motion these questions require.

Opportunities should present themselves to compare different authors’ style. From these comparisons students should be able to produce a comparative essay or perhaps a critical essay on generalities drawn from humorist writers. Either way, students should express their ideas in some written form to measure their progress in the analytical process.

Media

Our explorations of humor will not be limited to the written word. We will view several films (mostly only in portions), commercials (a terrific source of humor) and TV shows. A list of video sources, along with a brief description of content and usefulness is included in the bibliography. In addition to film versions of the literature we will read, one example of a TV show I would use is *Tom & Jerry*. This animated show has many of the elements of humor discussed earlier. It is also a show that most adolescents are familiar with. Other TV shows that may be appropriate depending of the grade taught and school policies include *Seinfeld*, *Mork & Mindy*, *Married with Children*, and of course, *The Simpsons*. I’m sure anyone wishing to teach this unit can add many more examples of their own as well.

Our analysis of films, commercials, and TV shows will follow the same reflective procedures that we have already established. After viewing, students should determine whether or not they thought it was humorous, which elements of humor were present, Why they did/did not find it humorous, and what it reminded them of. A question of audience may also be added when appropriate.

Almost any sitcom and many commercials would be useful in this unit. Most have crystal clear examples of the elements of humor previously discussed. Additionally, the question of audience is easily discussed with television shows and commercials. For example, the highly successful Budweiser ad campaign using animated frogs and iguanas was humorous and had broad appeal. A good discussion/activity would be to analyze,

using only the ads as evidence, whether the beer maker was targeting middle and high school students with these ads. Since students have previously discussed types of humor, appropriateness, and the relationship between maturity level and humor, they should be ready for such a debate.

As for films, I prefer to use them sparingly. I would not hesitate to show scenes from *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, or *Odd Couple*. I would wait to show an entire film, however, until we have read (or are about to read) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Since one of the goals of this unit is to have students recognize the pervasiveness and universality of humor, I believe a broader, eclectic selection would serve better. To further illustrate this, pair scenes from *The Taming of the Shrew* with *Ten Things I Hate About You* (a recent adaptation starring Julia Stiles). The purpose of showing films in this unit is to add the physical element of humor. Sight gags can be, although in diminished capacity, presented in written text, but one need only view a Chaplin movie to understand that words alone cannot convey the humor expressed by the human body.

One final note on films and TV: this viewing need not be in any chronological sequence. You may elect to present the film scenes prior to reading as well as after, or you may elect to view commercials before reading essays. You know your students as well as yourself; do what feels right. The important part is that the students are allowed to view the films and TV shows at some point during the unit.

Drama

The bulk of the literary analysis, however, will involve the reading of dramatic writings, particularly Shakespeare. Since just about every high school in the United States requires students to read something by Shakespeare, an introduction prior to leaving middle school would seem in order. Additionally, the universality of character expressed in Shakespeare's dramas allows students to access the plays more easily than others. Students will begin slowly, by reading scenes and analyzing the character interaction for elements of humor. Reflective writing from these readings will connect the characters and their behavior to people the students know in the real world today emphasizing their similarities. In addition to Shakespeare, students will read selections from the work of Ionesco and Neil Simon, particularly *The Odd Couple* or *Come Blow Your Horn*.

A good starting point for scene reading is *Much Ado About Nothing*. The verbal dueling of Benedict and Beatrice, particularly in act I scene I, should provide wonderful material for discussion. Benedict and his companions return from war to the home of Leonato who has a daughter, Beatrice, with whom Benedict has some prior relationship. The nature of this relationship, it seems, is one of romantic tension and intellectual sparring.

Benedict: If Signior Leonato be her father, she would not have his head on her shoulders for all of Messina, as like him as she is.

Beatrice: I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedict: nobody marks you.

Benedict: What! My dear Lady Disdain, are you yet living?

The two seem each to genuinely hold the other in disdain if one can believe their words. Yet, the subtext of their comments and the pleasure they take in having the other, if for nothing more than intellectual prey, lead us to believe that they may in fact feel contrary to what they attest. It is this incongruity of words and subtext that creates the humor in their exchanges.

How often in life, especially in dealing with adolescents, do we see people say the opposite of what they truly mean? Discussion should explore both examples and reasons for this. Why do people have difficulty expressing their true feelings for one another? Students should explore examples from their lives and make comparisons to the scenes between Beatrice and Benedict. Ultimately, students should identify from their examples clues to a person's true feelings. What allowed them to discern the person's real feelings despite the contradictory dialogue. After examining these and reflection, students again return to the text and apply what they learn by analyzing the actions of the characters compared to their dialogue.

The courting scene (Act II Scene I between Kate and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* also provides an excellent example of insult and subtext. Often in romantic movies, novels and real life, couples begin relationships far from romantically. This scene is not as tame as the aforementioned scenes with Beatrice and Benedict and its bawdy nature may be inappropriate for some students. However, if this is not an issue, the students will likely find this scene even more engaging because of its bawdy nature:

Katharina: If I be waspish, best beware my sting.

Petruchio: My remedy is then to pluck it out.

Katharina: Ay, if the fool could find it where it lies.

Petruchio: Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting?
In his tail.

Katharina: In his tongue.

Petruchio: Whose tongue?

Katharina: Yours, if you talk of tails; and so farewell.

Petruchio: What! With my tongue in your tail?

This provides an opportunity to discuss and examine flirtation and innuendo, both of which often involve humor. A good discussion can be raised regarding sexual harassment and the question: when does a joke cross the line?

Shakespeare

In the world of literature, no one can really compare to Shakespeare in influence or content. When this unit was being developed it was always with a final goal in mind: to make Shakespeare more accessible to my students. Through my research and reflection, this unit has grown, I believe, beyond its original boundaries, but in the end I must return to Shakespeare. After my students have explored humor in many different genres and in their own lives, they are ready to tackle something of more literary challenge. It is by applying what they have learned in this unit to the writings of Shakespeare that I am able to measure their understanding of the concepts we have discussed and assess the success of the unit.

So the real finale to this unit is an exploration of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Students at this age should respond very well to the fantasy elements of the play as well as the comedic qualities and situations, all of which will have been explored to some degree in previous readings and activities. The tale of young lovers, tyrannical paternal figures, and an enchanted locale that promises the hope of a happy ending, if but only a dream, will ring true to many students.

The reading should be done sequentially; that is, the play should be allowed to unfold before the students rather than be presented in fragmented scenes. For most middle school students this will be their first exposure to a full-length Shakespearean drama. The accustomed preparation for such a reading must first be made. General background on Elizabethan England and drama should be provided, as well as biographical information of William Shakespeare. If not previously presented, and depending on the students' needs, an explanation and discussion of iambic pentameter as well as vocabulary presentations should be made. When all of this is accomplished, the students should be ready to embark on a reading of the play.

Students reading the drama should follow each character through the story, identify moments of humor, and distinguish the source of the humor in the script. Characters that should be given emphasis for this purpose include Lysander, Demetrius, Helena, Hermia, and Bottom. Additionally, comparisons between Titania/Oberon and Beatrice/Benedict (or Kate/Petruchio) could also be made. What do the readers find to be humorous about these characters and why? How are they like us? What other characters are they similar to in their actions? These questions and others may be explored at some length.

In Act I, one moment of interest is in scene two when Quince is delivering the roles to his assembled actors. Students' attention should be affixed to the mannerisms and implications of Bottom's lines. His desire to play every part and even, as the lion, "...roar you as gently as any suckling dove...as 'twere any nightingale" should be recognizable as Identity humor of the element Eccentricity, which is a good first step at understanding the character of Bottom. His desire to be everyone, and yet by the definition of acting not be himself, violates the codes of normal conduct, even for an actor. The element of

Eccentricity is present when people act in a way that is out of the norm and thereby amuse us by their contrast with the mundane surrounding them. Bottom, in his first scene, surrounded by mundane characters, establishes himself as someone outside the norm, thereby setting up the events that follow for him.

Another moment is Puck's description of his humorous accomplishments in Act II scene I. Puck meets a fairy in the woods and after a brief exchange tells the fairy how he makes Oberon laugh. The speech illustrates several elements of humor and begins to define the character of Puck as a trickster. Oberon soon arrives to cut short his boasting, but students should examine this speech for clues to Puck's character and perhaps make predictions as to what is to come for the jester to the King of Fairies.

The Demetrius – Hermia – Lysander – Helena plot, which is the main story of the play, should be given a generous portion of time to examine. Have students create timelines for this plotline. As the story unfolds have students note the changes the characters go through in each Act. Ultimately, Puck's intervention causes Impersonation and Embarrassment culminating in an Unmasking that allows a happy ending. All of these are Identity elements of humor, though Puck's actions arguably cause other collateral elements to occur as well. This storyline can be used in numerous ways to illustrate humor and character. One of my favorite lessons is included under Lesson Plans: Character Shadowing. Students are divided into groups of four and each one follows a single character through the play. When the reading is finished, have the students act out abbreviated versions with their groups.

Identity humor is strong in this play. Nearly every character exhibits some degree of this type of humor. Other elements in the play that should be identified include Coincidence (which leads to Impersonation and Unmasking), Puns (Bottom as an Ass), Insults, Chase, Stereotype and Mistakes (Puck) just to name a few. Spend time allowing students to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the humor. It will serve them well when they tackle tragedies.

WRITTEN PRODUCTS

This part of the unit may be completed either before or after the reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Students are required to demonstrate their understanding of humor as it relates to the individual, society and literature through some form of writing. One option is writing a humorous scene. This may be an individual or group assignment. Students are to create original scenes of 3-5 pages that create a humorous situation. These scenes are most effective when they are acted out in class but may simply remain a written product. In addition to the script, the writer(s) should provide a brief (about 1 page) explanation of how and why the scene is humorous. This explanation should include vocabulary and concepts discussed in the unit so that it presents the student's understanding of humor.

Alternately, students may also write essays. The essay should be of appropriate length and complexity according to grade level. There are two types of essays I allow in this unit: the humorous essay and a comparative literary analysis. The humorous essay should choose a topic from the world in which we live and illustrate the humor that most people might miss in it using elements of humor explored in the unit. The comparative literary analysis should take two pieces of literature and compare the elements of humor in one element of story: characters, theme, setting, etc. This may work best if students compare humorous characters from different pieces of literature who also are humorous in different ways.

If presented at the end of the unit, this essay may represent a final exam over the concepts, vocabulary and ideas presented in the unit.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One

This lesson is designed to introduce each type of humor as defined within this unit. It is designed to be repeated four times, although if time allows, it does not have to be on different days.

Objectives

The students will:

- Define the four types of humor: Language, Logic, Identity, and Action
- Identify elements within each type of humor.
- Categorize examples of humor according to type and element

Materials

This lesson works best with a variety of stimuli: pictures, drawings, video clips, etc. However, you need only a chalkboard/whiteboard and something with which to write on it. If you do have pictures or other visual stimuli, you will need something to hang them with (tape usually.) Music or video will require the appropriate support equipment. Students should have paper and a writing utensil. Handouts with the important information, to be distributed after the lesson, can be used if desired.

Lesson

If you are using prepared stimuli, begin by placing them on the board, walls, and other easily visible places ahead of time.

1. Begin by reviewing the results from the Humor Inventory. (See Appendix A)

2. Explain that humor comes in many types. Use examples on the walls, or solicited from students to illustrate this.
3. Define the Humor Type (such as Language.) Students copy definition.
4. Have students identify examples on the board.
5. Explain that humor types have many different elements that can be classified within each type.
6. Define 2-4 elements under Humor type. (Language examples: Insults, Ridicule and Sarcasm are good ones to start with.)
7. Divide the students into pairs.
8. Each pair, for each element, must create or identify an example of each element.
9. Each group presents their examples to the class. Classmates vote “yea” or “nay” as to whether each is an accurate example.
10. Finally, students write their own definitions for each element and give an example (theirs or one of those presented by peers.)

Lesson Plan Two

This lesson is designed to introduce the students to the humorous essay. It is important that the students be able to read and understand the language use in the article selected. Additionally, it is imperative that they understand the types and elements of humor as previously discussed. With the first essay examined, it is best to work as a whole group or, if you have advanced students, small groups. This format provides scaffolding and greatly lessens the apprehension and anxiety of approaching new material. In follow-up lessons, students should read the copy independently or utilize the Internet to locate the essay. This lesson, with slight changes should be presented three or more times using different essays to insure mastery of skills and to increase familiarity with the form.

Objectives

The student will:

- Read and comprehend a humorous essay
- Explain the main idea of the essay
- Identify types & elements of humor in the essay
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the humor in the essay
- Connect the use of humor in the essay to their lives in a meaningful way
- (Utilize the internet to access published materials electronically)

Materials needed

For this lesson, you will need to provide each student with a copy of the essay. In future lessons students should have an opportunity to locate the essay needed electronically through the use of the Internet. In this case, recommend giving the student only the name

of the writer, date of the column, and have them find the article, recording their paths. You will find a variety of results and this helps build their Internet research skills. Additionally, for discussion of the essay, an overhead projector and transparency copy of the essay is useful.

Lesson

Read the essay as a whole group. During reading, students are to underline any passages they identify as humor.

1. When completed, discuss the content of the essay to ensure general group comprehension.
2. Then solicit responses from the class and compile a list on the chalkboard or overhead projector, of passages containing elements of humor.
3. When all responses have been recorded (or you judge enough responses/time) ask students to identify the TYPE of humor (Logic, language, Identity, Action) illustrated by each example and begin to catalog them accordingly.
4. Have each student select ONE example and complete a Daily Humor Log (Appendix B) for it, including the ELEMENT of humor it demonstrates. This may require further discussion, as it is possible that new elements may be present depending on at what point in the unit this lesson occurs.
5. Students share their responses orally.
6. Collect logs for assessment, if desired.

Lesson Plan Three

This lesson plan is designed to give students a better understanding of character by allowing students to focus on a single character throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I call this lesson "Character Shadowing". It is important the students are able to read and understand the literature being examined. Prior knowledge of the types and elements of humor are also essential to this lesson.

Objectives

The student will:

- Read and comprehend a selected drama
- Select a character to examine in detail
- Identify types & elements & effectiveness of humor expressed by the character
- Record, analyze and evaluate the actions and motives of the character
- Connect the use of humor in the play to their lives in a meaningful way

Materials Needed

For this lesson the student will need a copy of the play, blank paper, ruled paper and a writing utensil. As this assignment is ongoing, lasting until completion of the play, it may be helpful to you and the students if they created folders for their work on this assignment. This would ensure that their previous work would be safe and available for extension later.

Lesson

First divide the class into groups of four. Each student in the group chooses a character to follow from the following list: Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia or Helena.

1. Students begin this lesson by identifying and recording everything they know about their character at the beginning of the play.
2. Students should synthesize this information into a summary statement for their character.
3. Next, students begin a timeline on their blank paper. The first entry on this timeline should be the summary statement from step #2.
4. As they read the play in their group, the students should record their characters' actions and reactions on the timeline.
5. Using their ruled paper, students should analyze their characters' actions and motives. This is done in journal form. Students' writing should reflect comprehension of the literature and critical thinking.
6. Next, on the ruled paper, students identify elements of humor that are associated with their characters' actions, motives, reactions, etc.
7. Finally, as always, student should make a connection to the real world (their lives). This can be as simple as a paragraph stating how and why they might have behaved differently. It may also be a written comparison between their characters in the play and someone they know.
8. Students should be given an opportunity to share their responses in their groups or to the class as a whole.
9. Collect work for assessment, if needed.

APPENDIX A
A Humor Inventory

Student's Name: _____

For each situation below, circle "Y" for yes if you find the example humorous, or circle "N" if you do not find the example humorous.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. A stranger falls down in public. | Y | N |
| 2. You go to a party and see someone wearing the exact same outfit as you. | Y | N |
| 3. Some boy passes gas in class. | Y | N |
| 4. Some boy passes gas in church. | Y | N |
| 5. Some girl passes gas in class | Y | N |
| 6. Some girl passes gas in church. | Y | N |
| 7. You pass gas in class. | Y | N |
| 8. You pass gas in church. | Y | N |
| 9. You see someone you are attracted to in the mall and you begin to stutter. | Y | N |
| 10. You're on a date and you notice your boy/girlfriend has food stuck in his/her teeth. | Y | N |
| 11. You're on a date and you notice you have food stuck in your teeth. | Y | N |
| 12. Someone spills a drink. | Y | N |
| 13. Someone spills a drink on you. | Y | N |
| 14. You're giving an oral presentation and forget what you're talking about. | Y | N |
| 15. You see your principal on TV dancing. | Y | N |

Next are examples of things you may find humorous.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 16. An Aggie joke. | Y | N |
| 17. An old person joke. | Y | N |
| 18. A racial joke. | Y | N |
| 19. "Your Mama..." joke. | Y | N |
| 20. Misspelled words that create different meanings | Y | N |
| 21. Cartoons (Bugs bunny, Simpsons, etc.) | Y | N |
| 22. Comic strips (Peanuts, Blondie, etc.) | Y | N |
| 23. Sitcoms (Friends, Martin, etc.) | Y | N |
| 24. Commercials (Budweiser iguanas, Joe Isuzu, etc) | Y | N |
| 25. Impersonations (pretending to be someone else) | Y | N |

List the three funniest movies you have ever seen: _____

What do you think is the funniest thing on TV? _____

Who is the funniest actor/actress in movies or TV shows? _____

Why do you laugh? _____

APPENDIX B
Humor Log

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Observation:

I would give this a rating of _____ on the humor scale (1-4).

I think this was funny because:

I would classify this into the _____ type of humor because

This incident/example reminds me of

APPENDIX C
Elements of Humor

Humor Types

Language	Logic	Identity	Action
Allusion	Absurdity	Before/After	Chase
Bombast	Accident	Burlesque	Slapstick
Definition	Analogy	Caricature	Speed
Exaggeration	Catalogue	Eccentricity	Time
Facetiousness	Coincidence	Embarrassment	
Insults	Disappointment	Exposure	
Infantilism	Ignorance	Grotesque	
Irony	Mistakes	Imitation	
Misunderstanding	Repetition	Impersonation	
Over literalness	Reversal	Mimicry	
Puns, Word Play	Rigidity	Parody	
Repartee	Theme/Variation	Scale	
Ridicule	Stereotype		
Sarcasm	Unmasking		
Satire			

From Berger, Arthur Asa. *An Anatomy of Humor*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993 (p18).

APPENDIX D
Comic – Tragic Traits

<u>The Comic</u>	<u>The Tragic</u>
Chance	Inevitability
Freedom	Determinism
Optimism	Pessimism
Survival	Destruction
The Social	The Personal
Integration	Separation
Low Status	High Status
Trivial	Serious
Lowly Characters	Elevated Characters
Pleasure	Pain
Cathexis	Catharsis

Excerpted from *An Anatomy of Humor* by Arthur Asa Berger, page 10.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Humor Theory

Berger, Arthur Asa. *An Anatomy of Humor*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993.

When I discovered this book, my unit began to write itself. Mr. Berger presents an easy to understand theory of humor, delineated in manner that is well suited to be taught or applied to literary analysis. I borrowed much from this work in my instructional design.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1999.

A very good criticism on the works of Shakespeare. Bloom describes the major themes and characters of the plays used in this unit. His chapter of the universality of Shakespeare should be of assistance. This is primarily a book used in lesson preparation.

Durant, John and Jonathan Miller, eds. *Laughing Matters: A Serious Look at Humour*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1988.

An anthology of articles on humor theory. It has a wide variety of topics. Everyone should read the chapter, "Humour as a vehicle for unconventional ideas."

Fisher, Russ. *In Search of the Funny Bone*. Houston: Rich Publishing, 1988.

A manual for would-be comics. However, It provided good inspiration including the humor log (joke file).

Gruner, Charles R. *The Game of Humor*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997.

A very good book on humor overall. I especially liked the chapter, "Mirage of 'Innocent' Humor." Great for preparation of "appropriateness" discussions.

Haig, Robin Andrew. *The Anatomy of Humor*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1988.

This book provides an evolutionary record of humor as related to medicine and healing. Good for background and justification. Chapter on education provides some insights.

Holland, Norman N. *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.

This book looks at the evolution of humor and causes of laughter.

Lefcourt, Herbert M. *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2001.

This book provides a comprehensive look at humor and its effects on almost every aspect of life.

Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. Albany: State University of New York, 1983.
This rather short book provides several interesting theories on the causes of laughter.

Wickberg, Daniel. *The Senses of Humor*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.
This book provides a great introduction into humor theory and its evolution. It is a great source of inspiration.

Literature

Bombeck, Erma. *Family – The Ties that Bind...and Gag*. New York: Random House, 1988.
A very funny collection of essays about family and family life. Any of Bombeck's books would be useful during the essay portion of the unit. I prefer this one because of its subject matter. Most people can find someone in her essay's they recognize from their own lives.

Ionesco, Eugene. *Four Plays: The Soprano/The Lesson/Jack or the Submission/The Chairs*. New York: Grove Press.
Of the plays included, I particularly like *The Lesson* for its dark comic storyline. Students enjoy this story of education as well.

Shakespeare, William. Plays available from several publishers. Plays to consider for this unit:

A Comedy of Errors
The Merchant of Venice
A Midsummer Night's Dream
Much Ado About Nothing
The Taming of the Shrew
Twelfth Night

Simon, Neil. *Come Blow Your Horn*. New York: Samuel French, 1961.
Simon's first major production and one of his funniest. There are a lot of scenes that could be explored for different types or different elements of humor.

———. *The Odd Couple*. New York: Samuel French, 1994.
Classic Neil Simon. This venerable standard is full of contrasts and situational humor. Again, students love the verbal warfare that erupts here. A very useful text.

Filmography

Biography – William Shakespeare: Life of Drama (1997).
This is a production by *A&E's Biography* series. It can be used effectively to introduce Shakespeare to students. A high quality production.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1999) starring Kevin Kline and Michelle Pfeiffer.

Kevin Kline portrays Bottom delightfully. This film is not as risqué as some but there is enough here to warrant consideration if that is an issue. Otherwise, the film provides a very nice closing activity for the unit or may be viewed concurrently with the reading.

Much Ado About Nothing (1993) starring Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson.

Great scene work between the main stars. It also has a hilarious performance by Michael Keaton as the constable. Use to illustrate scenes and the nature of physical humor.

Ten Things I Hate About You (1999) starring Julia Stiles and Heath Ledger.

A contemporary adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*. A fairly popular movie with teens, it is always interesting to watch the reactions when they discover they have liked Shakespeare all along. Use it for scene comparisons with Shakespeare's text.

Internet Resources

<http://www.randomhouse.com/>

Random House

The website for Random House publishing, publishers of Erma Bombeck books. Doing a search by author will give an extensive list of her works should you wish you try others.

http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/living/columnists/dave_barry/

The Miami Herald

The website for Dave Barry's column at the *Miami Herald*. This URL takes you right to his column, which is posted online. Students can read the syndicated columnist online, searching through many archived essays.

<http://www.shakespeares-globe.org/>

Shakespeare's Globe

The official website of the new Globe Theatre in London. Students can take a virtual tour of an authentic Shakespearean theatre and review essays on Shakespeare, the Globe as well as recent productions.

<http://www.borg.com/~rjgtoons/edu.html>

This is a site of educational cartoons by Randy Glasbergen. Some of them are quite clever. Students could view them online, or you could inquire using information on the website for reprint rights.