



Appreciating Class Clowns

Why's everybody always pickin' on me?

—“Charlie Brown” by Jerry Leiber
and Mike Stoller, Tiger Music, Inc., 1959

INTRODUCTION

Allow me to present my credentials for writing this book about class clowns. My first qualification is that I have

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conducted research on class clowns and have studied the lives of professional comedians while serving as a professor of educational psychology at the University of Florida and a professor of counselor education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

My second qualification is that I am a certified class clown. I can never remember a time when I was not a class clown. I have spent my life pursuing laughter. I realized I was hooked on laughter when at four years of age I found a rubber pretend knife. This great find allowed me to develop my specialty act, an "Indian dance" (with apologies to First Nations and other Native Americans). Although I had never seen an Indian dance and knew nothing about dancing, I became a local celebrity. Adults asked me to do my Indian dance. I happily obliged.

My willingness to perform was more than an attention-seeking process. I needed to share something I considered precious with others. This something was a most cordial and sincere summons to laugh and live fully, if only for a moment.

One of my earliest Indian dance solo performances was during my grandmother's Eastern Star Chapter meeting of twenty elderly ladies. My performance featured me in my underpants, dancing madly, making silly noises, showing a frightening face, and brandishing my rubber dagger. Getting attention was my life's blood. It meant attention, acceptance, and perhaps even love.

Then came school. I went first class in first grade. I learned to read by sounding out dirty words on bathroom walls. There I discovered the magic of double entendre. My word was "but," and it was as close to risqué as I could imagine. Whenever the teacher's back was turned, I scurried to the next row of desks and whispered "but" in the ear of the first-grade class beauty. This behavior brought the house down . . . with me under it. I failed first grade. The teacher said I was too immature. She was probably right.

Then, my chosen career as class clown picked up speed. I went solo theater. I did anything for laughs. Receiving attention meant everything, even at the cost of punishment. Through elementary school, I spent so much time in the principal's office that I practically became the assistant principal.

During my frequent visits to the principal's office for being "out of line," I systematically befriended the school secretary, Miss Savage. I cheerfully volunteered to sharpen pencils, collate papers, stuff envelopes, staple handbooks, dust shelves, count books, empty trashcans, track down the custodian, and do any dog work that needed to be done. These efforts paid off handsomely. I became the school secretary's pet (she could not afford a dog).

My favorite tasks were to run errands and deliver messages. These tasks required a hall permit, which was the ultimate "Get Out of Jail Free" card. Delivering a note to someone in the school provided me with endless opportunities to practice my chosen profession as class clown.

My greatest joy was to return to the classroom from which I had most recently been ejected. I would peek through the oblong window in the classroom door and wait until the teacher's back was turned. When my classmates spotted me, I would present my "Indian" face. The teacher would be completely puzzled by the outburst of student laughter. Then, she would turn quickly and catch my Indian face framed in the window. About this time, I was introduced to ISS—in-school suspension.

The ISS room was located in a converted coal bin in the school basement. It was the elementary school equivalent to a maximum-security prison. I survived quite nicely in the coal bin, plotting ways to gain future attention. I considered my time in the coal bin as "between engagements."

My role as class clown blossomed in secondary school. Jefferson Senior High was a large school that

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served all of the high school students in Roanoke, Virginia. There I joined the Jefferson marching band as a drummer. This offered fresh opportunities for clowning. One day during band class, the director, Mr. Jerry White, made the mistake of leaving the band room to take a phone call. After he left, I convinced the eighty band members to line up four abreast and march down the wide hallways of Jefferson Senior High (while all classes were in session), playing "Stars and Stripes Forever." I may have been one of the reasons for the principal's early retirement.

Many of my happiest moments as a class clown took place in the cavernous Jefferson Senior High auditorium. There I participated in the French Class Assembly Program. Geraldine Leftwich (fellow student and a delightful free spirit) and I shocked everyone with a risqué Apache dance that included a lit cigarette and a split skirt. We were not enrolled in the French class, and we had never seen an Apache dance. Such barriers meant little in my endless quest for laughter.

In that same cavernous auditorium, before the entire student body, I participated in the American Legion Extemporaneous Oratorical Contest. Students who entered were expected to study the United States Constitution prior to the contest. On stage, each student contestant would reach in a hat and pull out a slip of paper. Each slip contained the title of one of the articles of the Constitution. Each contestant was given seven minutes to speak about the article he or she drew.

I do not remember which article I pulled from the hat, but it made no difference. I had not read the United States Constitution. However, I had read a story about Nathan Hale, who was an early American patriot. During the Revolutionary War, he was captured by the British and hanged without trial. That information was all a true class clown, in a state of panic, needed. I began

my seven-minute speech declaring my love for freedom and my appreciation of American patriots. Then, I switched my assigned U.S. Constitution article to Nathan Hale. Even here I faced a challenge. I could not remember what I had read about Nathan Hale, other than the British hanged him for spying. To fill my allotted seven minutes, I described Nathan's slow climb up the gallows steps—one (pause), two (pause), three, (long pause), four (longer pause), five (looong pause). My fellow students immediately recognized what I was up to and began to assist me with my very slow count. I reached the twelfth step of the gallows just as the required seven minutes elapsed. There are times when desperate wit is stronger than academic knowledge or platform skill. I won the contest.

My college life was more of the same. There I learned how to yawn with my mouth closed. On a bet, I wheeled the college homecoming queen around the entire campus perimeter in a wheelbarrow. With the help of a few fellow clowns, I delivered a 200-pound pig up a fire escape to the top floor of the girls' dorm. Later, I started a water fight in the dorm that resulted in considerable water damage (for which we paid dearly).

Sharing my early life as a certified class clown is not to gloat over a misspent youth. Rather, it is to establish my credentials for writing this book. I am proud to be a class clown. The greatest gift I know is to bring laughter to fellow human beings.

THE CASE FOR CLASS CLOWNS

Before making a case for class clowns, it is important to acknowledge that clowns can be a royal pain in the . . . neck. Clowns are far more likely than nonclowns to talk back, get out of line, push boundaries, and disrupt class.

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As a former junior high school teacher, I have lived with the harshest of realities regarding clown misbehavior. Yet class clowns, when their energy and humor are properly channeled, can be a delightful presence in any classroom.

Here is how Tom Sexton, a veteran of almost four decades in the classroom, described his experiences with class clowns:

I learned over the decades that if a teacher is fortunate enough to find a student with a great sense of humor, the smart thing to do is to tap into that rare gift and celebrate it. The energy that student humor brings to the class is priceless and helps to create an inviting classroom for everyone. Sometimes this humor needs to be managed by the teacher, as kids can get too caught up in it. However, it is a mistake for the teacher to squash it, as so many teachers tend to do. I have had students with this gift of humor and they have made the entire school year so much more enjoyable for the entire class.

Joel Siegel, special friend and classic class clown, provided this sample of funny business. When his third-grade teacher asked him to use the word "terrain" in a sentence, he responded, "It looks like it's going to rain." A class clown's comic attitude, when properly channeled, is truly a class treasure.

Seldom before in American history has there been a greater need for cheerfulness. Discontent, dissatisfaction, disappointment, frustration, and anger permeate our society. We are presently living through what many consider a humorless, reactionary, hate-filled moment in history.

Schools in particular seem to be locked in a mean-spirited approach to education. Zero tolerance, high-stakes testing, uniform standards, Procrustean curriculum,

mandatory retention, drug-free zones, fear of violence, constant surveillance, metal detectors, shake-down searches, rigid dress codes, and ruthless competition leave little time for laughter, joy, and cheerfulness for students, educators, and support staff.

To illustrate the uptight and often illogical anxieties of public education, one school introduced two new programs during the same year. The first was a comprehensive drug-testing program. The second was a program to “just say no” to drugs. Students who “just said no” to the drug testing were promptly expelled.

Perhaps never before in North American history has there been a greater need for schools to lighten up. Perhaps never before has there been such a great need for humor, laughter, and cheerfulness in the classroom.

An unappreciated and often unrecognized source of humor, laughter, and cheerfulness is found in almost every classroom. This source is the wit and humor of class clowns. The class clowns’ lighthearted and often upside down, loopy approach to life helps to banish the boredom, gloom, and monotony that can demoralize any classroom or school. Class clowns can provide sunshine for both the mind and the heart.

Here is how a second-grade class clown contributed to fun and laughter. Just before the Thanksgiving holiday recess a teacher asked her class, “What are we thankful for this Thanksgiving?” The little clown instantly replied, “I’m thankful I’m not a turkey!”

The laughter triggered by class clowns can have a significant impact on the psychological and even the physical well-being of teachers and students. Laughter allows us to accept the reality of stressful situations, while seeking ways to deal with adversity. It encourages us to make the best of embarrassing situations. Claudia Cornett, in her book *Learning Through Laughter* (2001), offers a long list of reasons for embracing humor in the educative process.

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Betty Prescott, former principal of a junior high school, shared an embarrassing moment that illustrates the value of humor in schools:

I met with all six classes of my junior high students before they left on a field trip to the Biltmore House in Asheville, North Carolina. I gave them the usual speech: "You are a representative of our school. You want to bring honor to our school, so behave like ladies and gentlemen—no foolishness." At that moment a "balloon" came floating down the aisle. I took this opportunity to say, "See, this is exactly what I'm talking about! We will not have students playing with balloons on the bus during our trip." I picked up the balloon, raised my chin and exited the room with dignity. I walked straight to my secretary's desk and asked, "This isn't a balloon, is it?" As she laughed hysterically, she confirmed my suspicion—the "balloon" was an inflated prophylactic. You have to love junior high kids to live with them!

A number of scientific studies (see Seligman, 2002) indicate that a sense of humor, measured by the Multi-dimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS), relates positively to a number of factors associated with psychological health. These factors include optimism, self-esteem, and perceived physical health. Negative scores on the MSHS are associated with psychological distress and depression. Good humor and laughter seem to be intimately related to one's quality of life. This includes having fun.

HAVING FUN AS A TEACHING STRATEGY

A significant advantage of humor is that it can be a super teaching instrument. It can be used to teach

concepts and stimulate intellectual development. Canada's Royal Conservatory of Music has developed an exciting, fun-filled program titled Learning Through the Arts. This program features such creative strategies as learning math through dance, science through music, language through rhythm, and social studies through visual arts. The goal is to integrate the arts into all content areas.

One high school teacher uses the television comedy show *Gilligan's Island* to teach history, government, literature, and sociology. She points out that *Gilligan's Island* was inspired by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The comic characters serve to represent a microcosm of American society. Each of the seven represents a segment of humanity. The teacher tosses out trivia questions to capture student interest: "What did Mary Ann do for a living before she was shipwrecked?" "Where did Gilligan sleep?" "What was the Skipper's pet name for Gilligan?" "Why did the seven characters pack so much luggage for a three-hour trip?" "Why, with so much talent, could they not figure a way to leave the island?" The class session ended with students singing the theme song that explains what the seven were doing on the island in the first place.

By using *Gilligan's Island* as a fun-filled stimulus, the teacher encourages communication and dialogue among her students. Education itself is a sort of dialogue. Dialogue assumes different viewpoints and opinions. Class clowns are quick to enter into dialogue with fellow students and teachers, particularly when they have the opportunity to have fun.

An illustration of how to teach math by having fun was provided by Lise Bourgeois at Fredericton's George Street Middle School. Lise instructs her eighth-grade students to construct paper airplanes for a math unit on data management. She asks her students to take five different trials of the same plane and measure the distance

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it flew. The students then calculate the mean, median, and mode of the average distances and plot the results on a graph. Lise explained that by having students actually see the plane in flight, they can understand why graphs look the way they do.

Over and above its value as a teaching strategy, having fun has value in its own right. It need not be justified solely on its association with school achievement. To paraphrase a hit song, "Students just want to have fun." Funny happenings reduce everyday tensions and frustrations, while making life more enjoyable. When one class clown was asked to name the longest river in South America, he replied, "It's not in South America." This particular clown delighted in loopy answers. When asked how many degrees in a circle, he asked, "How big is the circle?"

Jack Handey, a super class clown, told this tale: "I guess of all my uncles, I liked Uncle Caveman the best. We called him Uncle Caveman because he lived in a cave and because sometimes he'd eat one of us. Later on, we found out he was a bear." What teacher can resist such upside-down thinking?

BREEDING GROUND FOR PROFESSIONAL COMEDIANS

There are many opportunities for class clowns to become professional comedians. The fast-paced, nutty fraternity of show business is always on the lookout for talented youngsters. This talent is evident even before the class clown becomes a teenager. Steve Allen, in his book *The Funny Men* (1968), suggested that if a child is not a class clown by the time he or she is twelve years of age, it is highly unlikely that the child will ever develop into a professional comedian.

With very few exceptions, professional comedians began their careers as class clowns. From early childhood, class clowns possess an almost indefinable and spontaneous spark that separates them from the rest of society. This spark appears very early in life. Those who possess this ability are endowed with a rare and precious gift. Joan Rivers, professional comedian, referred to this talent as a gift from the gods.

Class clowns rarely tell jokes that require a narrative setup (e.g., "Have you heard the one about . . ."). For class clowns, joke telling is least important in creating laughter. Rather, most class clowns depend on observational humor and lightning-fast rejoinders and one-liners. For example, when one Virginia teacher asked her class to name Thomas Jefferson's final home, a class clown instantly answered, "I bet heaven." It would be hard to take issue with such an insightful response.

A clown's sense of humor seems spontaneous, achieved in the absence of previous conscious thought. Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2004) describes the snap, quick-as-a-wink actions made on the basis of intuition rather than information. These actions often take the form of a sudden explosion of funny comments, representing lightning calculations that put seemingly unrelated things together.

To illustrate, when one young teacher was establishing rules of behavior at the beginning of the school year, she announced to her third-grade class, "If you need to go to the bathroom, please raise your hand." The resident class clown responded, "How's that gonna help?" Clowns are quick to notice the similarity of things that differ, and the differences of things that are alike.

In the martial arts, when thought and action happen spontaneously, it is called sparking. Here is how Milton Berle (1989), a classic stand-up comedian, describes an early sparking experience:

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I was about four when I tossed off my first ad lib. My Uncle Charlie was at the dinner table with us. My Uncle Charlie had a unique way of going at chicken soup. In his hands, the soup spoon was a baton. The golden globules of fat in the steaming broth were notes to be tossed out in all directions. On this occasion, my mother cautioned Uncle Charlie to eat neatly, saying, "If you get one stain on that shirt, I'll kill you." I chimed in. I said, "Momma, you better kill Poppa. It's his shirt." My brothers laughed. Uncle Charlie laughed. My father laughed. My mother debated a comeuppance but decided what the hell, and she laughed too. (p. xxii)

A class clown's humorous talent exhibits itself early, even before the first days in school. Evidence of a class clown's intangible and almost ephemeral spark is found in the early lives of famous comedians. By the time he was three years old, Jack Benny was collecting all of the chairs in his home and placing them in rows. Then, he would put on his show, reciting poems, telling stories, and singing nursery rhymes. Milton Berle was tossing out one-liners before he was sixty months old. Bob Hope demonstrated his remarkable ability to make people laugh by the time he was four years of age. Andy Kaufman and Steve Martin began performing for fun by the time they were five years of age. Bernie Mac learned how to make his mother laugh through her tears when he was only five.

When clowns enter school, they are already in love with laughter. Tim Conway was breaking classmates up in kindergarten. Nine-year-old Jerry Lewis was getting laughs in his elementary school. Jerry Seinfeld was writing a book about humor while still a young boy. Bill Maher knew he wanted to be a professional comedian by the age of ten. George Carlin wrote in his fifth-grade

yearbook that he wanted to be a professional comedian when he grew up. Before he dropped out, Chris Rock kept everyone in his school laughing.

An example of a class clown starting young is Jay Leno, stand-up comic and television show host. In his book *Leading with My Chin* (1996), he describes what a teacher wrote on his fifth-grade report card: "Jay has the ability, but does not apply himself." Jay explained that the only time his mind was totally focused and not spinning all over the map looking for distraction was when he was being funny. From early on, Jay's greatest goal in life was to make people laugh.

Many class clowns go on to become internationally famous comedians and comedy writers. This was especially true during the late twentieth century "Golden Age" of comedy, when many class clowns became professional comedians. These include Steve Allen, Lucille Ball, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Lenny Bruce, George Burns, Sid Caesar, Johnny Carson, Imogene Coco, Phyllis Diller, Dick Gregory, Bob Hope, Jerry Lewis, Richard Pryor, Joan Rivers, Red Skelton, and Jonathan Winters, among others. Many of these classic comedians are still with us and continue to be highly popular.

We now have a new generation of gifted comedians to make us laugh. This group includes David Chappelle, Margaret Cho, Billy Crystal, Ellen DeGeneres, Whoopi Goldberg, Kathy Griffin, Darrell Hammond, Steve Harvey, Jay Leno, George Lopez, Bernie Mac, Eddie Murphy, Conan O'Brien, Rita Rudner, Jerry Seinfeld, Jon Stewart, Chris Rock, Wanda Sykes, Robin Williams, and many others too numerous to mention. But whether classic or contemporary, professional comedians report an early background of having been class clowns. They sensed at an early age that clowning was what they were uniquely suited for and what they were put on this earth to do.

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Jerry Lewis, world famous comedian, wrote that everyone who walks out on a stage is a child. He explained that they're out there for one reason—to gain affection and understanding. For Jerry Lewis, applause means “I love you, baby,” “Good job, sweetheart.”

Here is a story told by Tim Conway to describe his early life as a class clown:

In kindergarten class, PS 149, Miss Delaney tells us we've got to act out the story of Thanksgiving. It's all about John Alden and Miles Standish and eating turkeys and sweet potatoes. I've never eaten this stuff, and I don't know who these guys are, but I figure if she says John Alden first, he must be the big shot.

“I wanna be John Alden!” I yell. I am put in the pilgrim chorus. All we have to do is walk across the stage, carrying a cardboard musket. And Miss Delaney warns us, “If you don't bring your own costume, you're not in the play.”

Okay. Pop is a skilled tinsmith. Working from a picture in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, he wraps some five-and-dime-store black oilcloth around an old derby to look like a stovepipe and attaches a belt buckle to the front of the hat with thin iron wire.

Two days later: As I walk across the stage with the motley pilgrims, I stop and scream, “Oh! The Indians!” I grab my heart, as if hit by an arrow, and fall down. Gasps in the auditorium.

Then I jump up, smile at the people so they'll know I'm not hurt. And I amble off. In the hall, Miss Delaney grabs my ear, and her huge bosom trembles menacingly over my eyes: “You bad boy! Why couldn't you just walk across like I told you?”

I don't know why. I had to make a production out of it. I had to be “on.”

Few class clowns go on to become professional comedians, but all clowns contribute to a more cheerful world. Regardless of what adult occupations or professions class clowns find themselves in, they are usually successful. Alleen and Don Nilsen, in their book *Encyclopedia of 20th-Century American Humor* (2000), state that there are few if any careers where having a sense of humor would not contribute to personal and professional success.

WHO IS A CLASS CLOWN?

A class clown is a student who consistently and successfully invites laughter. Class clowns' humor is an affirmation of cheerfulness and a declaration of the human spirit. Class clowns are able to express with humor what often is implied or unsaid. They are usually the ones who take the first step and utter a new word. They inspire and inspire us with their cheerfulness and love of life.

A special quality of class clowns is to combine humor with metaphors. Class clowns have the capacity to paint new realities using funny and often mixed metaphors and similes. Willie Cosh, a Scottish friend and very funny guy, provided an example: "The world is your lobster." Another fun-filled example is the comment of a class clown who responded to an insult: "I may be an idiot, but at least I'm not smart."

People think in pictures. Class clowns sense this and exploit it by drawing funny cartoon worlds with words. Ann Nivens, an elementary school administrator, provided an example of a clown's tendency to think in terms of pictures. Ann said that when she was in the sixth grade her class moved from room to room for math, English, social studies, and science. Ann's classmate was Bucky, an unflappable class clown. The sixth-grade

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English teacher was extremely demanding. She had the reputation of being the meanest teacher in the whole school. Students were afraid to even whisper in her classroom. Bucky, on the other hand, took life in stride. To him, everything was a joke. He was full of fun and laughter. The English teacher assigned the class to write a thousand-word essay. Bucky turned in his paper, which contained a single drawing. Under the drawing Bucky wrote that his social studies teacher said that a picture was worth a thousand words.

Class clowns differ from circus clowns, who rely on outlandish costumes, grotesque makeup, and physical abnormalities. Class clowns, on the other hand, generally rely on their wit, humor, and zany personalities. In school, Jerry Lewis was constantly doing off-the-wall things. His classmates called him "Id" for idiot.

In writing about circus clowns, Jack Handey (1992), a professional comedian and former class clown, explained that for him circus clowns aren't funny. He wondered where his fear of clowns started, and he concluded that his fear goes back to the time he went to a circus and a clown killed his dad. There is a fine madness in the zany statements of many class clowns that is hard to resist.

Both class clowns and circus clowns delight in working with a partner, often covering each other with meringue pies, real or imagined. This dialogue was heard between two high school class clowns. The first said to his partner, "That guy looks like our principal." The second clown responded, "That is the principal." The first clown commented, "Well, they certainly resemble each other."

As every teacher knows, the natural habitat of class clowns is schools. Schools have always provided a rich environment where class clowns can sharpen their skills at making people laugh. Classrooms, cafeterias,

playgrounds, athletic fields, bathrooms, hallways, and auditoriums all provide a performance stage and a captive audience. When a middle school teacher admonished her class, "When I was your age, I could name all of the presidents in order," a quick-witted clown responded, "That's not fair. There were only four when you were our age." Class clowns have a constant supply of funny material and an appreciative audience of fellow students.

The ability to make others laugh seems to be instinctive. Viewing class clown behavior as instinctive is not meant to open the age-old debates between nature and nurture, heredity and environment. ("If a child looks like his dad, that's heredity. If he looks like a neighbor, that's environment.") Rather, instinctive is meant to suggest a predisposing talent for making people laugh. Martin Seligman (2002) uses the term "signature strengths" to describe strengths of character. A signature strength of class clowns is a comic attitude toward life. Who could ever forget Jon Stewart's bemused look or Oliver Hardy's slow burn? This gift for laughter is triggered and maintained by early life experiences.

Often the trigger is an older relative who serves as a role model. The model is usually a funny adult who is greatly admired by the emerging class clown. Jay Leno reported that his father had a profound impact on him because of his dad's zany attitude toward life.

In my own role as class clown, my role model was my mother. She had a wonderful *Auntie Mame* approach to life that filled the world with laughter. In her last days on earth, she prepared a sign for her hospice room door: "I may be depleted, but I'm not defeated."

We all can be witty on occasion, but we cannot match class clowns whose wit comes from some hidden power. Class clowns have an unmistakably funny personality, coupled with a humorous outlook on life. Sheldon

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Patinkin (2000), author of *The Second City: Backstage at the World's Greatest Comedy Theater*, described clowns this way: "What may define Second City clowns most clearly is that they're the ones audiences start laughing at by the second time they see them on the show, regardless of what's happening in the scene." As Patinkin explained, being a class clown isn't anything that can be taught. Trying to be funny is like trying to be a giant. You can pretend to be serious, but it is very difficult to pretend to be a class clown. It's part of your personality, your charisma, your sense of yourself, and you carry it with you where ever you go. No matter what a class clown says or does, it tends to be funny. While the currency of clowns is laughter, cheerfulness is their commodity.

THE VALUE OF CHEERFULNESS

Cheerfulness is a quality of good spirit, joy, optimism, and gladness that warms the hearts of most people. According to the Renaissance scholar Michel de Montaigne, "The highest wisdom is continual cheerfulness; such a state, like the region above the moon, is always clear and serene." Cheerfulness differs from happiness, which is a consistent feeling of well-being and contentment. Class clowns may not be happy, but they are of good spirit, the life of the party. There is life to be enjoyed, and they want to be a part of it. Their cheerfulness seems to brighten a room when they enter and darken it when they leave. They follow Shakespeare's advice in *Richard II*, "Lay aside life-harming heaviness and entertain a cheerful disposition." For class clowns, being serious is equivalent to being dull. Perhaps the most serious conviction a class clown holds is that nothing is to be taken too seriously.

The words “cheer” and “cheerful” have a rich history. In the *King James Bible* the terms appear often. However, in later translations (*The Complete Bible: An American Translation, 2001*) “cheer” and “cheerful” were changed to “courage” and “courageous.” It is interesting to note that *cor*, the Latin word for “heart,” is the basis for the word “courage.” Both cheer and courage are invitations to take heart and be of good spirit. Both terms describe the upbeat approach to life exhibited by most class clowns.

To conclude this introduction to class clowns, clowns are sometimes referred to as “devilish.” This term is usually used in a generally affectionate way. Devilishness is typically exhibited in the form of practical jokes, mischievous pranks, satirical comments, and harmless tricks. However, there is always the danger that if devilishness goes too far it can result in the clown’s humor becoming hostile.

Claudia Cornett (2001), a noted authority on learning through laughter, offers this caution:

Humor does have its dangers, and it is the wise teacher who knows its force. If it occurs at the wrong moment or is inappropriate, it can destroy a mood or distract attention. If it gets out of hand, it can turn a classroom into a circus. And if it ridicules (like sarcasm), feelings can be hurt. Humor can belittle and denigrate, leaving the recipient feeling powerless. (p. 46)

The ability to monitor and control the social environment is a hallmark of good teaching.

Class clowns teach us to laugh at ourselves. Laughter is a wonderful safety valve. It is the ability to laugh at the mistakes we make. Teachers who cannot see the humor in much of what happens in school are in danger of what

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educators call burnout. Teachers who cannot laugh are dangerous to themselves and dangerous to their students. Chapter 2 explains the two basic types of class clowns and shows how these types influence life in classrooms.



ENCORE

(A REAPPEARANCE AND ADDITIONAL PERFORMANCE)

1. Have Fun. Humor is a wonderful teaching strategy. It can teach concepts and stimulate intellectual development. Moreover, humor has value in its own right. It need not be justified solely on its positive connections with academic achievement.

Suggestion: Make a list of ways that you have fun and check the list regularly. Enjoying physical activities, reading books, meeting with friends, spending time with loved ones, and traveling to exciting places are just the tip of the iceberg on ways to invite fun and laughter into your life. Make sure you're not shortchanging yourself.

2. Channel Humor. When classroom fun is not properly channeled, it becomes a disruptive force. The teacher's ability to monitor and control the classroom social environment is a hallmark of good teaching.

Suggestion: Most books on classroom management stress six important teacher practices: dress better than your students, provide successful experiences for everyone, plan lessons ahead, keep your cool, be consistent, and be professional.

3. Inspirit Your School. School can become more welcoming, lighthearted, and enjoyable for everyone who enters the building. Class clowns help banish boredom, fight monotony, and spread sunshine.

Suggestion: Talk to colleagues about having the first five minutes of every school meeting devoted to “happy talk.” Share successes, tell funny stories, sing a humorous school song, do a skit. Do what it takes to invite everyone to lighten up.