

# Laugh a Little, Learn a Lot: Making Your Message Stick!

Florence Bramley  
The Graphics Group  
Staten Island, New York

The purpose of this paper is to begin to explain and explore the role of humor in education. It won't make stand-up comedians or cartoonists of anyone. (However, if you have inclinations in that direction, there are some books in the References and Suggested Reading sections that you may want to check out.)

Actually, I owe the inspiration for this paper to Chandler Screven, co-editor of the *ILVS Review*. For those of you who don't know Chan, it may be helpful to picture him. He's probably in his 60s, is about 6'3", is very slim, has pure white hair, and usually has a very serious expression. Chan was in the audience in 1989 when, with much quaking of knees and sweating of palms, I gave my first paper at a Visitor Studies Conference. Having given many presentations to the "zoo community," I wasn't sure how to bring insights to this predominantly museum audience.

The topic was how to sneak evaluation in when clients are averse to the concept. Having learned much from the writings of people in the audience, I hoped to demonstrate how their lessons can be applied. Punctuating what could have been a rather dry paper by telling a couple of "almost true" stories, I illustrated the various personnel mentioned with slides of African animals—the design team was a herd of giraffe, the zoo director an antelope, the education coordinator a colorful little bird, and so forth. (Are you smiling?... I guess you had to be there.) Anyway, the audience loved it, the unexpected slides had them laughing often throughout the presentation. What a relief!

When it was over, Chan, with most solemn demeanor said, "That was very good. We all laughed."

The fact that this rather intimidating group of intellectuals had actually had *fun* listening to my presentation gave me many hours of pondering. In preparation for the following year's presentation, I began to look into publications about laughter, memory and the brain. Stumbling on vague references to beta endorphins now and then, I also found reference to Penfield's work. Penfield (1952) demonstrated that memory and emotion are inextricably linked.

The result was *Promoting Social Interaction* (Bramley, 1990). To summarize that paper: what we're dealing with when two or more people

discuss a sign is broader and more abstract than how big to make the type. It goes beyond the decision of how many words to use on a label. These factors are very important, but something else is also happening. Through the social experience we create for our visitors, we are contributing to the positive memories of adults and children. We are helping create a healthy balance for the unavoidable stresses of their everyday lives.

Our visitors are mostly families who want to have an enjoyable time, yet we have a lot of very dreary messages that we want them to consider. In the zoo field we're talking about saving countless animals and vast habitats that may disappear within our lifetime. Museums and parks are faced with educating the public about equally serious issues. Now and then we need to create a "cosmic" perspective so visitors can relax mentally and digest these issues without gagging on the details.

Looking at the scholarly Visitor Studies audience, it was becoming clear that what we need is "official" *permission* to lighten up. We need data from the scientific community about the positive effects of humor on learning. A number of sources can be found in the medical community, among them Doctors Steve Allen, Jr. (1988), William Fry, Jr., and Raymond Moody, Jr. All have published serious material about the impact of humor on human life.

In short, physiologically, laughter decreases muscle tone, i.e. it relieves tension throughout the body (Moody, 1978). The brain, being a muscle, is simultaneously relaxed and the mind opens up to new thought. Furthermore, findings demonstrate that mirth affects four more major systems of the human body: the respiratory, cardio-vascular, endocrine, and central nervous systems (Fry, 1982). Psychologically, laughter links people. It creates a social bond even if there are only two people present. It also provides a link between an individual's conscious and subconscious mind.

The idea of presenting serious subjects playfully is very hard for many professionals to accept. In fact, there is a term for this phenomenon. It's called *professional solemnity* (Moody, 1978). By the time anyone has worked hard enough to earn an advanced degree and/or has gained years of experience, that person does not want to be the object of laughter. It becomes harder and harder for that professional to access the laughter we all experienced as a child. A four-year old laughs 500 times a day, an adult 15 (Goodheart, 1992).

Contributing to this aversion to being laughed *at* is the fact that much of the humor we encounter is in some form of ridicule. This kind of Joan Rivers/Don Rickels comedy actually *distances* the listener from the subject. It makes sense that most of us would not want to be part of this unpleasant experience. Nor do we want our treasured animals or artifacts to be the object of ridicule.

However, as Victor Borge says, "A smile is the shortest distance between two people." If we can get our visitors to smile, laugh or chuckle,

they relax together and they are receptive to learning. They will remember the feeling of being very happy at our park or museum. "We do not laugh because we are happy. We are happy because we laugh." (Goodheart, 1992). Without understanding exactly why, visitors will come back again and again because the experience is always very enjoyable for them. This affects not only our bottom line of gate receipts, but also the effectiveness of our educational messages. Repeat visitors give us a much better chance to make an educational impact.

One of the wonderful assets of laughter is that it doesn't cost much. Without the expense of creating high-tech interactives, you can create a delightful educational experience for your visitors. What's more, a little humor goes a long way. It works best if sprinkled sparingly, in unexpected places. This kind of mirth creates a "cosmic" perspective. The laughter brings relief from the sympathetic pain of being faced once again with diminishing rainforests and vanishing species. Actually laughter converts these issues into "stimulants which promote our well-being, both physically and mentally" (Moody, 1978). From this refreshed perspective, we are able to do something about remedying the problems addressed, rather than wallow in the depression hopeless sympathy engenders.

For example, in one of our well-known zoos there is full-color sign that shows a dead seal with its stomach cut open with coins glittering inside the bloody cavity. The text tells that it died because it ate the pocket change people toss in the pool. That sign upsets so many people that they move on quickly and do not linger at the seal pool. This is a shame, because there's a lot of pleasure in watching seals, a lot of opportunity for learning.

Now let's imagine that about eight feet away there's another sign, a cartoon. This cartoon shows a bunch of seals in "Heaven," sitting on clouds. One group of seals is apart from the rest with obviously different halos. One "old timer" is explaining to a puzzled "newcomer," "Oh, their halos are like that because they ate the coins from the bottom of the pool."

An unexpected cartoon like this would provide food for thought, reinforcing the important message that coins in pools are mortally dangerous. Also, it may relax some people who had been turned off by the first sign, giving them incentive to look more closely at the animals. Ideally, two such cartoons could be installed, one to either side of the grim graphic. (Personally, I'd like to see it replaced.)

As Sid Caesar (1992) says, "You take the truth—that's what comedy is—and make it a little bigger than life." Whether or not seals go to heaven is not the point. That is the "bigger than life" twist that causes people to stop, chuckle, and take another look at the truth that seals die from eating coins. Most people would not want to be part of the demise of a seal, so they would certainly hesitate to throw coins into the water.

Chan's serious comment three years ago pointed the way to some of the most enjoyable discoveries I've ever encountered. Researching available studies of humor led me to *The Positive Power of Humor and Creativity*

conference this past April. It seems the inspiration for the whole field was Norman Cousins (1979), a man who literally laughed his way to health. The only researcher who is working on the hard data I had hoped to find is Dr. Fry (1979, 1982, 1984a, 1984b, 1987, 1992). He has been researching and presenting papers since 1979, however it wasn't until 1992 that he was invited by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* to submit an article summarizing his physiological research. Dr. Goodman (1992) was also asked to submit an article for that issue.

There are countless professionals in the "soft" sciences who can attest to the value of humor. The way in which material is presented proves through personal experience that humor works. The truth is that a smile, a chuckle, a giggle, or a guffaw will relax our mind and body to varying degrees. In this state of unexpected "mental vacation" we are receptive to the next thought. Also, we are open to forming connections from very subtle cues. An excellent example of a true-life situation is at the Topeka Zoo. There is a large banner that labels one of the newer buildings *Gorilla Encounter*. Just a few feet away, a smaller sign points to the Human Entrance. What an unexpected connection about our relationship as fellow primates!

Space does not permit a report on each of the speakers, books and articles that take the subject of humor seriously, but not solemnly. However, the material in the bibliography has been selected to help you find topics that will tickle your funny bone. The *Humor Resources Catalogue* (1991, 1992) is filled with material that can help any writer develop a lighter approach to education.

In conclusion, what keeps us from exploring and eventually integrating a new approach into our not-quite-perfect educational system? Often the key is "Yes, but." "Yes," this or that is a good idea, "but..." (fill in any reason or excuse that comes to mind). So, if you want to overcome the ubiquitous "Yes, buts," perhaps the best place to start is with your own laughter. If some quote or cartoon makes you chuckle, chances are some of your visitors will also enjoy it. Try it next to an appropriate exhibit and observe the results.

If we can weave laughter and smiles into our graphics and presentations about the plant and animal kingdom, artifacts, historical people and sites, then we can reach our audience in an unexpected way. We make them fellow chucklers who relax and discover something delightful about the world around them.

## Epilogue

Because reading this paper at the 1992 Visitor Studies Conference would have been ineffective, a totally different approach was taken for the live audience. Many of the ideas for that 15 minute mini-workshop were inspired by Dr. Sheila Feigelson (1992).

---

## References

- Allen, S., Jr. (March 1988). *Rx for health through creative silliness*. The Institute for the Advancement of Human Behavior's Power of Laughter and Play Conference, Anaheim, CA.
- Bramley, F. (1990). Promoting social interaction: More than just a sign. In S. Bitgood, A. Benefield, & D. Patterson (Eds.) *Visitor studies: Theory, research, and practice, Volume 3. Proceedings of the 1990 Visitor Studies Conference*. Jacksonville, AL: Center for Social Design, pp.139-143.
- Caesar, S. (1992). Interview in *Laughing matters: It really does!* 8(3). Saratoga Springs, NY: The Humor Project.
- Cousins, N. (1979). *Anatomy of an illness as perceived by the patient*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Feigelson, S. (1992). *Not just for laughs: Humor in training, teaching, and leading meetings*. Audio cassette # HAC-15 of workshop at The Positive Power of Humor & Creativity Conference sponsored by The Humor Project, Saratoga Springs, NY.
- Fry, W. F., Jr. (1979). *Using humor to save lives*. Annual Convention of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, Washington, D.C.
- Fry, W. F., Jr. (1982). *The psychobiology of humor*. The Psychobiology of Health and Healing Conference, Brigham Young University, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Fry, W. F., Jr. (1984a). *Making humor acceptable to a disaster-oriented world*. The Fourth International Conference on Humor and Laughter, Tel Aviv, Israel.
- Fry, W. F., Jr. (1984b). *The complexity of humor*. The Fourth International Conference on Humor and Laughter, Tel Aviv, Israel.
- Fry, W. F., Jr. (1987). *Fear of laughter*. The Sixth International Conference on Humor and Laughter, Tempe, Arizona.
- Fry, W. F., Jr. (1992). Physiologic effects of humor, mirth and laughter. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, April, 1857.
- Goodheart, A. (1992). The therapeutic power of laughter. Workshop at The Positive Power of Humor & Creativity Conference sponsored by The Humor Project, Saratoga Springs, NY.
- Goodman, J. (1992). *Humor/Creativity 101*. Audio cassette # HAC-1 of workshop at The Positive Power of Humor & Creativity Conference sponsored by The Humor Project, Saratoga Springs, NY.
- Humor Resources Bookstore Catalogue* (1991-92). Most titles in this bibliography are available from 110 Spring Street, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866.
- Moody, R. A., Jr. (1978). *Laugh after laugh: The healing power of humor*. Jacksonville, FL: Headwaters Press.
- Penfield, W. (1952). Memory mechanisms. *A. M. A. Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry*, 67, 178-198.

---

### Suggested Reading

- Allen, S. and Wollman, L. (1987). *How to be funny: Discovering the comic in you*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Paperback.
- Bowman, L. (1989). *Leisure learning: The correlation of age and attitude*. AAZPA Offices, Oglebay Park, Wheeling WV: American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums Regional Conference Proceedings.
- Helitzer, M. (1987). *Comedy writing secrets: How to think funny, write funny, act funny, and get paid for it*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.
- Screven, C. G. (1990). Uses of evaluation before, during and after exhibit design. *ILVS Review: A Journal of Visitor Behavior*, 1(2), 36-66.