

# EDUCATING WELL THROUGH STORIES AND LAUGHTER

Workshop presentation by **Peter Waterman**

at the Australian Conference of Lutheran Education

27-29 September 2004 - Adelaide, Australia

*“Each of us has been designed for one of two immortal functions, as either a storyteller or a cross-legged listener to tales of wonder, love and daring. When we cease to tell or listen, then we no longer exist as a people. Dead men tell no tales”*

Bryce Courtney (*“A Recipe for Dreaming”*)

From the dawn of time stories have been told and listened to. Before the advent of radio and television storytelling was a widely practised art and even in our technological age today a person who is a good storyteller is highly valued. For many cultures, stories themselves were highly regarded - tribal storytellers were elected by communities as narrators and curators of traditional tales. In Aboriginal culture the songlines were stories that told of the existence of creation. The songlines existed from one side of the continent to the other; each story telling how a particular valley, rock, river or hill was created and each story linking into the next one. Stories are sacred. Stories are magic, taking us backward or forward in time, and linking the past and the future with the present. Stories can entertain, educate, instruct, inspire and heal. We have many different forms of stories – fables, fairytales, myths, folk tales, legends, parables, personal stories, historical stories and tall tales.

Let's face it – everyone loves a story; from a little child to the oldest person on earth each are enchanted by the power and the magic of story. The world's greatest teachers through the ages used stories to get their message across. Jesus and Buddha used parables. Confucius utilised story and Aesop taught people through his fables.

We can stimulate, motivate and educate our students through the power of stories (and if those stories have threads of humour woven into the fabric, the more colourful the tapestry becomes). The most inspiring stories though are our own stories – when we tell these the students can learn something about ourselves and our stories can be a model to them in their own lives. The other inspiring stories are the ones of our students – we often don't know them but when we hear them our understanding of them is clarified and we can care for them capably with the personalised knowledge of their own story.

We can all use the richness of stories to create a learning atmosphere that is alive. No matter what our teaching discipline, stories can enrich the learning process. The wonderful thing is that students become naturally engaged in stories and we can use the forum of stories to teach lessons in life. Anecdotes, true inspiring stories, myths, legends, fables, parables – use them all because our students love sitting cross legged listening to tales of wonder and awe. With stories you can take your students to places you never thought possible.

Stories can also be the centrepiece of our curriculum. Several recent units come to mind:

- Year 8 English - “The Island”  
Students are travelling on a mystery flight somewhere in the Pacific – a flock of Albatross fly into the engines of the plane which plummets into the ocean. The plane has crashed 1 kilometre from a deserted island. The unit is a diary writing unit – each day a story is told and then students construct their own stories of survival on the island as shelter builders, medics, fishermen, hunters etc.
- Year 10 Christian Studies - “Relationships”  
15 short stories selected and read where values in relationships are discussed. For assessment, students write and tell their own stories that teach us something about values in relating – could be a myth, parable, anecdote, true story or historical story.

- Year 12 Study of Religion  
This wonderful course begins with teachers sharing their stories and students analysing them in terms of five components of a world view. Students then hypothesise world views of great people in history through an oral presentation. For another assignment (on the meaning created through Death, Dying and Human Suffering) students conduct comprehensive interviews with people who have had an intimate experience with the topic and then write an interview report discerning the world view of the individual.

Our classroom climate can be enriched with a spirit of laughter.

Just suppose we juxtaposed laughter into the serious side of life. Integrating the humorous into our relationships, mundane events and tragedies can lift our spirits and lighten our loads. There are four reasons why teachers should use laughter in their own teaching and these reasons apply to anyone involved in education.

- (1) Laughter gives us physical and psychological health
- (2) Laughter enhances positive relationships
- (3) Laughter promotes creativity and intelligence
- (4) Laughter helps solve conflict.

All are no doubt aware of the positive effects of laughter on our lives. Robert Burton wrote way back in 1621 in his book “Anatomy of Melancholy”, that mirth *“purges the blood, confirms health, causes a fresh pleasing and fine colour, prolongs life, whets the wit, makes the body young, lively and fit for any matter of employment.”* These words are never more relevant than now. John Morreall suggests that laughter results from *“a pleasant psychological shift”* – we can all actively make that shift and so transcend the serious in our lives.

Those who laugh together, last together. Laughter has an amazing cohesive effect on people.

It greatly assists in the emotional aspect of the school – when people are happy, laugh together and so enjoy working together, the positive emotional climate generated by their interaction makes work pleasurable and satisfying. I guess the opposite is true also. The ability to laugh and not take things too seriously is necessary to achieving that positive emotional climate.

John Morreall says that laughter is contagious and that group laughter works like atomic fission. Your laughter makes me laugh harder, and mine reinforces your laughter. In other words it serves as having a cohesive effect on the group; even with strangers – being able to laugh together bonds the group (similarly we feel closeness to people when we cry together).

As a teacher laughter is the key to fostering better relationships with students. If two boys are fighting down the back I might say “gentlemen, no touching”. They quickly let go of each other and laugh. Or if someone arrives late I say “you’re early for tomorrow” and they laugh and apologise. If an unfortunate flatulence hits the air I might say “if you’re going to say something I’d prefer you say it in a more appropriate manner.” The class laughs and our lesson continues. My teaching philosophy is that if I have fun the students will also have fun and they will learn.

Laughter enhances our creativity. Edward de Bono suggests that humour utilises lateral thinking, a subject that he is very passionate about. William Hazlitt in 1830 suggested that refined intellectual processes are involved in the creation and appreciation of humour. John Boskin goes on to suggest that humour is the most effective weapon in the repertory of the human mind.

Zen teachings have a concept called beginners mind – that is when faced with a problem, participants call out absurd, funny and amusing solutions. In the beginner’s mind everything is possible; in the expert’s few. You see when you are relaxed it’s easier to be creative. Take the shower principal – hot water caressing your body makes you feel relaxed. I write some of my best speeches in the shower, although I have to be careful because the water makes the ink run.

As a teacher I believe if my students have fun and are relaxed they will learn. As classroom facilitators we need to create that spirit of fun by just breaking up the lessons with games and activities – it is good if it relates to what you are doing but it does not have to. It serves to keep students awake, energise and revitalise them. People also remember things more effectively if there is a strong emotion associated with it. In this case, using the emotion of joy we can do that.

Laughter is good to use in conflict resolution. There is a story from the Cuban missile crisis. Russian and American negotiators were deadlocked. Someone suggested they tell jokes. The Russian began with a riddle “What’s the difference between capitalism and communism?” All were silent “In capitalism man exploits man – in communism tis the other way around.” They laughed and the talks continued.

I guess you need to be careful here though; it is not recommended to make a joke when someone is angry or aggressive – you may end up with more than you bargained for – however further down the track, lightening the moment with humour can be effective. A quarrel often ends when both people laugh at the incongruousness of what they are trying to do. Again if you are involved in a conflict situation try to step out of the situation and see it from above.; It will give you a new perspective and hopefully allow you to see the funny side.

I remember when I co-ordinated an alternative school program. Our clients were students who were homeless or had dropped out of the mainstream system. Many (if not all) were difficult students. My most effective tool during that period was humour. It was a survival mechanism but also a way of dealing with the students. One student Michael used tell staff to get f\*\*\*d. Many staff could not handle this and left. When Michael said it to me I asked him to explain exactly what he meant. He told me I was sick but never said it again. Then there was Jason, a tall 18 year old who had been expelled from eight schools in the previous two years; the last school taking out a court order preventing him coming onto the property. Sometimes he would “disappear” and I knew where he was – on the roof. I’d tell him that we were all coming up there to have our lesson on the roof and I’d begin climbing up the drainpipe. “All right” he’d say, “I’m coming down”. At the end of each day all staff had a “debriefing” session before going home. They were important meetings – we often went home laughing, reflecting on some of the things that had happened during the day – like Jason locking all the staff in the office and our creative way of getting out.

Bill Cosby, one of the great comedians, suggests that if you can find humour in anything, then you can survive it. If you take life seriously you won’t get out alive.

One of the proverbs tells us *“A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance, but low spirits sap a man’s strength”*.

Does God have a sense of humour – we can absolutely, unequivocally answer yes to that question. To know this all we need do is look at the person next to us. It is far better to laugh about oneself than to cry.

Jesus – a man not especially known for his humour suggested that *“unless you become little children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”*. My interpretation of this is unless you stop taking life so seriously, regain your sense of wonder, laugh often and be playful again, then you will experience life as a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be enjoyed.

Australian author Michael Frost, in his book “Jesus the Fool” says how Jesus, as the fool, may be easily derided and scoffed at, but he can never be ignored because he brings a new freshness, a vitality, a new way forward to every situation.

1 Corinthians tells us *“If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become wise ....we are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ.”*

Do crazy things in teaching.

- With my Year 8 English classes I start with a “daily dash” – five minutes of creative writing. ; One day I gathered them all into our small front office with their note pads and a biro writing on the topic “squashed together in the front office”.
- In a Maths class Sam announces “Maths is boring!” I asked him what would make it more interesting for him. “Singing” he replied. For the remainder of the year we sang a Christmas carol each day in our maths class – and if anyone has ever heard Sam singing they would never be bored in Maths again.

Whether it is Year 8’s or year 12 students, they all need to laugh.

Playing games, telling jokes, utilising the power of stories, disciplining with humour, singing, doing crazy things – all of these help generate laughter and fun in our classroom. It improves our collective health and allows us to educate well. This year by Year 11 Christian Studies class prepared lessons to give to Year 7 students enlightening them on different religious traditions. It was interesting in that they utilised strategies that I use to make their lessons interesting – quizzes, role plays, jokes and storytelling.

Games are effective. The Real Life game in our year 8 English course is one such curriculum activity. Each student selects an occupation that has a specific wage, tax, super etc. Students need to construct a budget, design business cards, write holiday brochures on their preferred holiday destination, buy things within their budget, organise their leisure activities. The students love it and the quality of the work they produce in this unit is amazing.

I remember when I first began teaching I would wake up in the morning and think “hells bells what am I going to do today – oh no I’ve got 10C” Now I wake up and think something different (I don’t have 10C any longer). When I wake up in the mornings now I think – “Great! School today – I’m going to have some fun with my students.” I think if I can do that, the students will have fun and they will learn.

It is important to be able to laugh at yourself. It gives us humility as it prevents us from becoming too self centred or defensive about our ego. I discovered the power of laughter one day when I looked in the mirror and I cracked up and the mirror didn’t.

Samuel Butler said many years ago that *“a sense of humour keen enough to show a man his own absurdities will keep him from the commission of all sins, or nearly all, save those that are worth committing.”* A man may be a fool and not know it but he won’t have that ignorance if he is teaching. Teaching is knowing that there’s shaving cream on your ear or that your fly’s undone or you are wearing odd socks.

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**ORIGINAL STORIES** by Peter Waterman were told during the presentation.

### **ACTIVITIES USED DURING PRESENTATION**

**Colours/Animals/Coffee** – An icebreaking activity

- Colours - Ask students to choose their favourite colour and write down four words that outline the essence and character of that colour. Ask students to read out what they have written. You then tell them “psychologists tell us that the words used to describe your favourite colour is a description of your own personality.”
- Animal - Ask students/people to select a favourite animal and write down 4 words to describe the essence and character of that animal. Ask some students to read out what they’ve written. You then tell them “psychologists tell us that the words used to describe your favourite colour is a description of your preferred partner in life”.
- Coffee – Ask students to write 4 words that come to mind when thinking of the word “coffee”. Ask several to read out what they’ve written. You then tell them “psychologists tell us that the words used to describe your favourite colour is a description of your feelings of physical contact with the opposite sex.”

### **Coin Toss**

Ask students to choose heads or tails. The whole class stands and put hands on head if choosing heads and hands on tail if choosing tails. Toss coin – losers sit down. The last person standing is winner.

### **Word Games**

Choose any word – eg Laughter – Allow 2mins to see how many words students can make out of the letters in Laughter.

### **Creative Definitions**

Give unusual made up words eg Moroxin – Ask students to ‘create’ their own definitions for the word. Some are quite funny and regularly promote laughter.

### **Singing on Cue**

Keeps students awake and is fun. Eg when the word ‘tragedy’ is mentioned sing the chorus of the Bee Gees song “Tragedy”.

*Tragedy  
When the feeling's gone and you can't go on  
It's tragedy  
When the morning cries and you don't know why  
It's hard to bear  
With no-one to love you you're  
goin' nowhere*

## **RESOURCES**

John Morreall (1983)      Taking Laughter Seriously  
State University of New York Press

Simon Critchley (2002)      On Humour (Thinking in Action)  
Routledge

Rumi (1990)      Delicious Laughter  
Maypop Books

Vicki Woschnick (2002)      He Who Laughs, Lasts (article)

Michael Frost (1994)      Jesus, the Fool