

Laughing with the Ninth Graders – Humor in the Main Lesson

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In Waldorf schools in Grade Nine the so-called Humor main lesson block is taught. This has a serious background. For just at this age young people need a capacity that allows them to see themselves with other eyes. The German teacher, Florian Heinzmann, gives an idea of how it might go.

Steffi and Corinne stand in front of the class, leading a discussion of experts. The moderators set the guest in front of a “running camera,” in front of the public. There are a few conditions: All contributions follow in alphabetical order: The first begins with the letter A, the next with B, and so on.

Steffi begins: “So, dear members of our audience, a heart-felt welcome to the Monday Morning Show, where the theme today is, Hammer Throwing Competition in Hawaii. How do you feel so soon before the contest, Mrs. Schneider?” – “Very well, thank you, very well.” “Cholesterol problems are not allowed to occur here in Hawaii, am I right?” – “I believe that is so. The food in our hotel is absolutely excellent.” – “Iron deficiency? Do the competitors here often suffer from iron deficiency?” – “Perhaps, oops, sorry, Fanta is good for this condition.”

The themes were chosen by students, according to my guidelines: We need some kind of sport and an exotic land. The students laughed, and the actors did, too. The exercise came from the Improvisational Theatre, an independent art form established some years ago, founded by Keith Johnstone and spreading around the world, becoming a box-office hit. Like the exercise mentioned, there are many exercises from improtheater that are very practicable for school use. One can divide the students into groups of two to four students (two moderators and two interviewees), and let them practice on their own. At the end, the courageous ones can perform before the whole class.

A good Humor main lesson is one where there is a lot of laughter. And this is, naturally, true for other main lessons as well. Every student learns best when the

instruction is fun, and the instruction is fun when it's full of humor. In this respect the Humor main lesson is perhaps the best practice for good teaching. And in addition, laughter is not only healthy, but it also trains the thinking. [In German, the word for joke, "Witz," comes from the word for knowledge, "Wissen,"] There is a quote from Goethe's *Faust*: "A comedian could teach a preacher." Not for nothing do comedians count as reliable and dependable advisors, as recognized in the great success of Hape Kerkeling's book describing his experiences on the Camino de Santiago.¹ Improtheater is a reliable stimulator of the laugh-muscles. I use these exercises every morning in the rhythmical section of my Humor main lesson, and not only in the Humor main lesson. I see Improtheater as a sustainable alternative to choral speaking. It might even be the salvation of the rhythmical part of main lesson overall.

Great Humorists Serve as Stimulation

In the first five to seven days of the Humor main lesson block, we take up various humorous texts. Here, above all, my goal is to move the students to engage in creative writing or other artistic forms.

We read or listen to sketches from comedians such as Loriot, Rüdiger Hoffmann and Horst Schlämmer, and then act them out in groups. We tell many jokes, both teacher and students—without sex, violence, or disrespect to human beings—and write poems in the style of Christian Morgenstern, Kurt Tucholski, Joachim Ringelnatz, Ernst Jandl, Heinz Erhard and Erich Kästner. One can have the students write a poem in the style of the original, with a similar title. [There is an example here, built on word-play, that would be very difficult to recreate in English. The original poem depicted is *Ottos Mops* by Ernst Jandl, and a student's poem.]

As with all teaching, it is recommended here as well to be as close as possible to the spirit of the times, and to use contemporary texts. Robert Gernhardt, Ror Wolf or Thomas Gsell can be drawn upon, for example. Just as tragedy is oriented towards what is high and noble, in the essence of humor there is a certain element of coarseness or earthiness. The weaknesses of human beings and their gross physicality are essential characteristics of all comedy and should therefore also be allowed to be themes.

Further we discuss and draw appropriate cartoons, from their own current newspaper articles. We read funny short stories, such as "Der Filialleiter" [The Branch Manager] by Thomas Hürlimann, and also write funny stories. The introduction for this can be a comical or puzzling picture from a magazine, for which the students supply the explanation in their story. A favorite creative assignment is composing a parody of a fairy tale in the style of Ringelnatz's "Rotkäppchen" [Red Riding Hood]. We discuss irony and sarcasm in such examples of satirical graphics from Klaus Staeck or something from the

magazine, *Titanic*. In these cases one must choose carefully to avoid offending sensitive students. In addition, students can make their own satirical collages with items from magazines. In any case, in connection with this project, the students need to clearly understand that satire does not pursue the goal of hurting people, but rather it serves to bring up in a mocking manner, deplorable conditions in the social life or cases of lack of virtue.

The Deeper Meaning of the Humor Main Lesson Block

In the second part of the main lesson block, we take up a longer prose text, for example, “Schischiphusch,” by Wolfgang Borchert, or a comedy. The time for Zuckmeier’s “Hauptmann von Köpenick” [The Captain from Köpenick] is unfortunately past. The comedy as well as the deep symbolism in Kleist’s “Der Zerbrochene Krug” [The Broken Pitcher] would scarcely be understandable for a Ninth Grader. Shakespeare’s comedies [“A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” for example] are by far and away more accessible for students. Unfortunately good and equally deep comedies in the post-war literature are rare, especially in German literature. One unavoidably lands in the Theatre of the Absurd (for example, Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” or Ionescu’s “Exit the King”) or in tragic-comedy (such as Dürrenmatt’s “The Physicists” or “The Visit”). This last piece is actually meant for Grade Nine like no other. For one thing, the close connection between tragedy and humor can be discussed and rated as a symptom of the times, and secondly, there arises a new aspect of comedy, namely, black humor.

Yet it is not only this. The mixing of tragedy and humor corresponds to the nature of humor in general, that always has a depth, a truth, and a seriousness, as one can discover in the character, temperament, and biography of all clowns and all genuine comedians. And it corresponds to the feeling life of the Ninth Graders, who find themselves in an uncertain stage between childhood and adulthood, through the onset of puberty.

Deep Longing for Hilarity

Through the increase of hormones that often goes along with a distancing from the parents, the soul life of the Ninth Grader is often marked by swings of mood and feelings. Laughing and crying lie nearer to each other than perhaps ever before—and closer than they will ever be again in life. A deep longing for hilarity goes hand in hand with an inner abyss of vulnerability. For all these reasons, the theme of humor, together with the second German main lesson block of Grade Nine, the “Goethe-Schiller Block,” in which, naturally, the theme of tragedy predominates, works in a healing and balancing manner on the soul of the Ninth Grader. Through this the students should learn what in the ordinary course of events they cannot yet do: to laugh at themselves. This heightened

distance to the self is an important part of individuation on the path to a healthy self-consciousness. This is also helped by drama, and attending dramatic performances. The high point of the Humor block for me is attending a comedy or other humorous play. Also, professional improvisational theatre pieces and theatrical competitions can be recommended in this regard, and are well enjoyed by the students.

The Humor block is a great opportunity for every upper grades teacher who is suddenly in front of a new Ninth Grade class, as yet unknown to him. Humor lends itself, as almost nothing else, to the forming of social relationships: “Laughter is not the worst beginning of a friendship, and it is by far the best end.” (Oscar Wilde, “The Picture of Dorian Gray.”) And so I was not really surprised when a student asked me, after the Humor block was over, “Will we have a Humor block again in Grade Ten?”

Literature

Marianne-Miami Andersen: *Theatersport und Improtheater*, Planegg, 1996.
Christoph Göpfert: *Jugend und Literatur*, Stuttgart, 1993
Malte Schuchardt: *Lachen und Weinen. Humor und Tragik in Kunst und Literatur*, Stuttgart 2005.

Note

1. Published in English as: *I'm Off Then: Losing and Finding Myself on the Camino de Santiago*, by Hape Kerkeling, 2009.