

The Sense of Humour Project

1. Introduction

Humour at work is very trendy now, and we no longer need to get over-worried about age-appropriateness, when executive toys, serious play and office fun days are aching hip. (We still need to be slightly conscious of the age thing, and we've put our own views about this later on in this feature.)

Here are some ideas inspired by people with profound and multiple disabilities, people who work with them, and the work of humour mavens like the fab Bernie de Koven of deepfun.com. Bright's staff also take humour very (un?) seriously, and as I look round my office I can see:

- A solar-powered plastic plant which waves gently up and down during day-light
- A fish-tank furnished like an office - complete with filing cabinet, computer and swivel chair for the high-flying (high-sailing) fish
- A keyring with a mouse in elegant evening dress who sings "I want to be loved by you alone boo-boo-bee-do"

2. The Sense of Humour project

There's masses of paradoxically flat, dreary research about the emotional and physical health benefits of humour, along with some very moving accounts, notably Norman Cousins. In his book *Anatomy of an Illness* he describes how 10-20 minutes of deep belly laughter gave him hours free from the pain of his debilitating disease.

Humour is said to be good for:

- Increasing muscular and respiratory activity
- Stimulating the cardiovascular system, and the muscular and skeletal systems
- Increasing antibodies
- Increasing pain tolerance
- Decreasing levels of stress hormones
- Decreasing heart rate

Well, it's not so much humour as the resulting good old belly-laugh which produces these and other delightful health benefits.

Bright is working with colleagues in learning disability organisations to explore how to bring more laughter and happiness into the lives of people with profound and multiple disabilities. Many individuals with this level of disability lead stimulating, enriched lives. Not quite at the pitch of the challenges set for

celebrities in the jungle, but almost hyperactive compared to Homer Simpson. For other people, especially those in larger, more institutionalised homes, life can be fairly grey, with days and weeks relatively undifferentiated.

We're gathering a pile of ideas from other organisations, professional funny people, friends, Christmas crackers and particularly inspired wall graffiti. We hope that as well as the direct humorous benefits to individuals, if staff groups focus more on humour, there could be positive impact on staff morale, recruitment, retention and even sickness levels. (What a lovely piece of research this could be!)

3. What's funny?

Analysing why things are funny is a bit like knowing that the tiger doesn't eat the magician because it's actually a hologram/pantomime tiger/stuffed dead thing. But at the risk of spoiling some of the fun, it can help to know what the main dynamics of humour are if we're trying to humour-up everyday activities. It boils down to a handful of techniques:

- Incongruity - the joy of the unexpected. Everything else is arguably a permutation of The Big Surprise.
- Juxtaposition. There's a piece of research out there with the title: *Balancing the right to habitation with the right to personal liberties: The rights of people with developmental disabilities to eat too many doughnuts and take a nap*
- Irony and its cousin satire. Sometimes reality is so bizarre that it's funny. (The President of America.) And sometimes it's so bizarre that it's definitely not funny. (The Iraq war.)
- Puns - and *Carry On* type double entendres.
- Exaggeration and understatement. Basil Fawlty and Polly
- Familiarity. Jackie Mason has delighted the Jewish community for years with his painfully accurate renditions of our meshugasses (follies).

The following joke (from joke.jewish.net) illustrates a few of these techniques.

*A spaceship lands on Mars, and the astronauts are getting ready to go out when they look out the window and see something really weird. Radioing Earth they yell: "Houston, we've got a problem, there's a bunch of fully-bearded green Martians wearing black clothes, sidecurls and hats out there."
"Go out and make contact, find more about them", was the reply.*

So they did, and when they approached the group one of the astronauts asked: "Do you all dress like that?"

"Oh, not at all, reply the Martians, Only the orthodox ones!"

4. Some fun and funny ideas

There are very few activities which can't be done on a paired basis - somebody with a disability and somebody without. It then just becomes a matter of finding some great activities. Here are a bunch that we particularly like.

a. At home

Games and activities

- funny board games - eg ones that are linked to TV shows.
- juggling
- skittles
- Twister

Cooking

- funny looking food, including funny designs (pizzas and of course cakes are great for creating humorous 'pictures')
- food with surprising tastes
- funny noises

TV, videos, DVDs...

There's a fantastic wealth of humorous films and watching them can be a brilliant social opportunity - not a substitute for being together. There's little to beat the joys of watching a hilarious film with pals and popcorn. Here's one list of the Top 100 Funniest films. Many of these involve quite complicated, even obscure plots, but there's plenty of pleasure to be got from aspects of films other than plot and dialogue. And just being with other people who are laughing is delightful.

- 1. [Some Like It Hot](#)
- 2. [Tootsie](#)
- 3. [Dr. Strangelove](#)
- 4. [Annie Hall](#)
- 5. [Duck Soup](#)
- 6. [Blazing Saddles](#)
- 7. [M*A*S*H](#)
- 8. [It Happened One Night](#)
- 9. [The Graduate](#)
- 10. [Airplane!](#)
- 11. [The Producers](#)
- 12. [A Night at the Opera](#)
- 13. [Young Frankenstein](#)
- 14. [Bringing Up Baby](#)
- 15. [The Philadelphia Story](#)
- 16. [Singin' in the Rain](#)
- 51. [The Seven Year Itch](#)
- 52. [Ninotchka](#)
- 53. [Arthur](#)
- 54. [The Miracle of Morgan's Creek](#)
- 55. [The Lady Eve](#)
- 56. [Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein](#)
- 57. [Diner](#)
- 58. [It's a Gift](#)
- 59. [A Day at the Races](#)
- 60. [Topper](#)
- 61. [What's Up, Doc?](#)
- 62. [Sherlock Jr.](#)
- 63. [Beverly Hills Cop](#)
- 64. [Broadcast News](#)
- 65. [Horse Feathers](#)

- 17. [The Odd Couple](#)
- 18. [The General](#)
- 19. [His Girl Friday](#)
- 20. [The Apartment](#)
- 21. [A Fish Called Wanda](#)
- 22. [Adam's Rib](#)
- 23. [When Harry Met Sally](#)
- 24. [Born Yesterday](#)
- 25. [The Gold Rush](#)
- 26. [Being There](#)
- 27. [There's Something About Mary](#)
- 28. [Ghostbusters](#)
- 29. [This Is Spinal Tap](#)
- 30. [Arsenic and Old Lace](#)
- 31. [Raising Arizona](#)
- 32. [The Thin Man](#)
- 33. [Modern Times](#)
- 34. [Groundhog Day](#)
- 35. [Harvey](#)
- 36. [National Lampoon's Animal House](#)
- 37. [The Great Dictator](#)
- 38. [City Lights](#)
- 39. [Sullivan's Travels](#)
- 40. [It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World](#)
- 41. [Moonstruck](#)
- 42. [Big](#)
- 43. [American Graffiti](#)
- 44. [My Man Godfrey](#)
- 45. [Harold and Maude](#)
- 46. [Manhattan](#)
- 47. [Shampoo](#)
- 48. [A Shot in the Dark](#)
- 49. [To Be or Not to Be](#)
- 50. [Cat Ballou](#)
- 66. [Take the Money and Run](#)
- 67. [Mrs. Doubtfire](#)
- 68. [The Awful Truth](#)
- 69. [Bananas](#)
- 70. [Mr. Deeds Goes to Town](#)
- 71. [Caddyshack](#)
- 72. [Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House](#)
- 73. [Monkey Business](#)
- 74. [9 to 5](#)
- 75. [She Done Him Wrong](#)
- 76. [Victor/Victoria](#)
- 77. [The Palm Beach Story](#)
- 78. [The Road to Morocco](#)
- 79. [The Freshman](#)
- 80. [Sleeper](#)
- 81. [The Navigator](#)
- 82. [Private Benjamin](#)
- 83. [Father of the Bride](#)
- 84. [Lost in America](#)
- 85. [Dinner at Eight](#)
- 86. [City Slickers](#)
- 87. [Fast Times at Ridgemont High](#)
- 88. [Beetlejuice](#)
- 89. [The Jerk](#)
- 90. [Woman of the Year](#)
- 91. [The Heartbreak Kid](#)
- 92. [Ball of Fire](#)
- 93. [Fargo](#)
- 94. [Auntie Mame](#)
- 95. [Silver Streak](#)
- 96. [Sons of the Desert](#)
- 97. [Bull Durham](#)
- 98. [The Court Jester](#)
- 99. [The Nutty Professor](#)
- 100. [Good Morning, Vietnam](#)

Executive toys

There's now a glorious range of 'executive toys' for the stressed and/or creative businessperson. Toys are the new toys. (Pardon?) Yup, toys are definitely where it's at for hip adults, as long as they are for ages 5 and over. The resources section has a list of great suppliers of fun stuff.

Poetry, music, drama....

All of the following can be made accessible and funny by camping it up - acting out the words, or sounds, and embellishing with extra movements and noises.

- funny poets - eg Benjamin Zephaniah, Ogden Nash, Spike Milligan
- performance - you could also consider inviting local poets to perform. Your local library may have contact details, or you could try via the excellent Poetry Zone.
 - <http://www.poetryzone.ndirect.co.uk/teach2.htm>

- Funny music - listening to and making - funny songs, funny instruments
- Sound tracks of laughter - eg the classic Laughing Policeman
- Funny faces - how about creating a photo book with photos of people pulling faces they definitely wouldn't want captured for their passport, perhaps because people are wearing comic wigs and holding obscure props.
- Making up a story - using cues from people, however indirectly suggested. For example, if someone waves their fingers staff have to incorporate the word fingers into the storyline. Or the colour of someone's shirt, the angle of their wheelchair...
- And of course the old favourite, charades, can be made very participatory by playing in pairs

b. Out and about

Almost any outing can be turned into a humorous occasion, if approached with the right (or sometimes the 'wrong'!) attitude. There are of course intentionally funny:

- Films
- Plays
- Comedy clubs!!

Even though a person may not understand a film or comedy act which is heavily based on humorous language, just being among people who are laughing a lot can be funny and uplifting.

Given how much time many people spend in mini-buses going to and from day centres, it's worth considering humour on transport. The easiest way of creating this is to have funny tapes, but perhaps transport escorts could be recruited from among local stand-up comedians?!

c. visitors

- getting kids in to tell jokes, show funny pics etc - staff laugh in appreciation, humorous atmosphere is created
- some universities have entertainment troupes which put on shows for community groups. Cambridge for examples has CULES: <http://www.srcf.ucam.org/cules/>
- faith communities - some are funnier than others and some branches of faith communities are keener on having a jolly time than others. But all are concerned about the well-being of their community members and will have congregants with cracking senses of humour.

d. Themed days

- *seasonal*. Halloween has obvious scope for fun as well as scariness, but so do Spring and winter
- *religious festivals* tend to be rather serious, if not gloomy, but there are some which are particularly good fun. The Jewish festival of Purim, for example, is celebrated by kids (and adults) dressing up. It's the one day in the year when synagogues around the country are filled with everything from astronauts to zombies.

whatever - colours, environment, local history, the moon..... see the *fun at work* books in the resources section

5. Age appropriateness

Such a tricky one, this. On the one hand, virtually every adult enjoys books, TV programmes or games which are designed for people 30 years younger or older than they are. And, still on this hand, most people with profound and multiple disabilities enjoy kids' games and jokes which are less complex than ones for older people. But the other hand is troubled by the risks of doing anything child-like with adults, especially as adults with profound and multiple disabilities are penalised and restricted in so many ways by being often regarded as 'child-like'.

One safeish area is that of 'cross-over' – those things that can be played by kids or adults, or ideally by kids and adults together.

Games:

- Card games
- Sports
- Fun-fairs
- Train sets (rather gender specific...)
- Harry Potter

And it's possible to make kids' activities more appropriate for adults, eg by:

- changing names. No need to call a game 'peek-a-boo', given the association this has with babies. If it's someone's favourite, it can be called "Bob's game" (especially if that person is called Bob...), or The Surprise Game etc
- using adult equipment, including clothes (no bibs! Especially now that you can buy very smart napkin holders)

A few more suggestions about age-appropriateness:

1. there are no strict rules. It will vary from person to person and in different situations.
2. we should always opt for the most age-appropriate option and presentation. Sometimes this will be very adult, and high status. And other times it will be very juvenile, but still valid because it gives a lot of pleasure
3. it generally is possible to create adult alternatives, even if these are more expensive in terms of time and/or money
4. most people's more childish moments and possessions are displayed in private. This is also a useful principle for people with profound and multiple disabilities, whether private is considered to be in the family lounge or in the person's own bedroom.

6. Making it happen

There needs to be a balance between consciously working at it and avoiding the happiness and spontaneity crushing "Come on everyone. You MUST have fun, laugh..." That said, how about:

- putting humour on the agenda for person centred planning i.e. having a 'what I find funny' section
- having humour as a teeny percentage of a service's annual budget. Or fundraising for this
- Including 'funny things in a services' community resources' files (eg local comedy clubs, funny occasions etc)
- Having monthly humour sessions or funny nights, partly as a way of introducing new people, eg neighbours. The easiest thing to do is show a funny video, but it could include any of the other ideas in this feature
- Making things more fun for staff, eg with:
 - fun training exercises
 - humour in conferences and other events
 - Recruiting (some!) carers from non-traditional sources, eg drama school
 - Staff training run by:
 - actors
 - clowns
 - comedians
 - Action for Leisure

7. Resources

Music. Many local areas have music groups who perform in care homes without a fee, for example www.pilgrimaire.plus.com

drama - including improvisation skills see www.the-spontaneity-shop.com

circus skills - fantastic fun to watch or participate in -

www.thecircusspace.co.uk

design (for adaptation of games etc) - Remap has volunteer engineers and other craftspeople who design specialist adaptations for people with physical

disabilities www.remap.org.uk

People

- professionals (i.e. fully-fledged actors etc)
- students - of drama, design, music etc
- people with learning disabilities as 'humourists' (members of the team)
- occupational therapists - is there nothing they can't convert, adapt or recreate? They're wonderful!

Books

Compassionate Laughter - Patty Wooten. A classic of the 'humour for health' genre, and although very hospital oriented, has inspiring ideas in it.

At the other end of the corporate spectrum, *Fun and Gains* by Carolyn Greenwich is aimed at sales teams working in highly competitive environments. The competitiveness in the games can be toned down for more collaborative situations!

Then there's these sort of books:

Fun at Work

Dave Hemsath, Leslie Yerkes

Laugh and Learn: 95 Ways to Use Humor for More Effective Teaching and Training

Doni Tamblyn

Playfair: Everybody's Guide to Noncompetitive Play

Matt Weinstein and Joel Goodman

The Laughing Classroom: Everyone's Guide to Teaching with Humor and Play

Diana Loomans and Karen Kolberg

Laffirmations: 1,001 Ways to Add Humor to Your Life and Work

Joel Goodman

Websites

Men in suits and ties playing with kids' stuff - and paying lots of money to do so: Lego has brilliantly converted their kids' classic into an executive team-building and creativity training activity.

www.seriousplay.com

And there are a surprising number of companies producing resources and providing training to make workplaces more fun. Our favourite one is Bernie de Koven's www.deepfun.com which is an amazing, and generous source of ideas, resources and contacts. There's www.happiness.co.uk which is the British version of the American Humor Project - www.humorproject.com

Laughter yoga - sounds like a contradiction in terms: isn't yoga meant to be incredibly sedate and quiet? Not the way that laughter yogaists do it! Check out www.laughteryoga.co.uk

Pets

A great source of laughter and happiness for millions. Even if a group don't have their own pet, they can enjoy being with a cat, dog or perhaps a weirder creature, thanks to the lovely Pets as Therapy charity. www.petsastherapy.org. And if somebody already has a dog but wants to have more fun with it, there's a great book, with photos which are as heart-warming to look at as they are to emulate. *97 Ways to Make Your Dog Smile* by Jenny Langbehn

Games, gadgets and toys

If you're looking for a basketball game for the bath, or a retro, energy-releasing Spacehopper, Hawkins Bazaar is the online or mail-order store for you.

www.hawkin.com

Other wonderful sources of fun and funny gadgets and gismos are:

www.presentsdirect.com

www.prezzybox.com

www.iwantoneofthose.com