

Comedy in a Cruel World
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Overview

The curriculum unit I have chosen to write, *Comedy in a Cruel World*, is designed for middle school students. Although the unit could be used at any grade level, my specific target audience is sixth grade English Language Arts students. This curriculum unit will address the themes of fairness and injustice. These are serious issues that must be approached with tact and sensitivity. In addition, the concepts of fairness and injustice introduce important underlying issues such as prejudice and intolerance... The intent of the curriculum unit is to offer a unique and effective way for students to recognize and deal with these serious issues. Numerous studies have demonstrated that exposing the humorous side of difficult issues can be a valuable tool for understanding those issues. My curriculum unit will introduce comedy to students as a mechanism for identifying and coping with injustice they may encounter. This will be done through defining, developing, and exploring humor in the context of a classroom production of a play.

Rationale

The rationale behind the development of this unit is two-fold. First, this unit will enable me, as a teacher; to have students meet many of the requirements needed for completion of their standards based portfolios. This unit will also meet many of the Communication Standards used in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Developing this unit will also help both the students and myself gain new knowledge and insight into the nature of comedy and how we can use humor to entertain, teach, and enrich our lives.

The seminar that I participated in, which led to the development of the unit, was entitled Comedy: From Aristophanes to the Present. The focus of the seminar was an exploration of comedies from times past to the present. Personally, I have never taken a course in comedy or thought much about the early history of comedy, which is one reason I chose this particular topic.

I suppose my first recollections of humor or comedy have nothing to do with the in-depth and detailed analysis of comedy as documented by writers such as Northrop Frye, or George Meredith. Instead I remember laughing with my siblings at silly cartoons on the TV every Saturday morning or snickering at slightly risqué jokes in my early teen years. I also remember my early passion for reading. Although I was and still am an avid reader, my focus in literature was not on comedy. What I learned about humor did not come from a book. That is one reason why I feel this curriculum unit is important. It will provide me with a way to learn more about this type of literature. I also see this unit as a teaching tool that I can use to expand my students' knowledge and understanding about comedy while at the same time broadening my own scope of knowledge and helping me to become a more well rounded teacher.

The second reason behind my rationale for developing this curriculum unit deals more directly with the students I teach. In my sixth grade English Language Arts curriculum, the students are exposed to different themes throughout the course of a school year. Each of these themes has a collection of stories from their literature book and several novels that deal directly with the chosen theme. One theme that my students analyze for a nine-week period is injustice. The title of the unit is "Justice for All", and deals with issues of injustice and fairness. Each of the stories in the collection deals with a different type of injustice or an unfair situation. This might be the prejudice encountered because of one's race or the injustice encountered as a result of being "different" than a group of peers. I believe that using humor to teach about an important subject like injustice is a novel and unique approach that will really benefit my students. I feel that using humor and comedy as methods to better teach students

about fairness really lends itself to the curriculum I am presently teaching. My sixth grade students also read several required books that deal with the themes of fairness and injustice. What better way to delve deeper into the books we are reading in the class than to create a unit that helps to clarify and illuminate the subject of injustice and how to best deal with the problem. What better tool to arm my students with than humor to help them face the personal injustices and unfair situations that they may encounter throughout their lives.

Objectives

As part of our Standards Based Portfolios, students are required to write for a variety of purposes. Among these are writing to inform, narrate, and persuade. Students are also required to complete a section in their portfolio that deals with a speaking, listening, and viewing component. Sharing their research and writings with the entire class through oral presentations would be an excellent way to fulfill this portfolio requirement. The research, writing, production, and performance of a class play would also fulfill several portfolio requirements. In order to meet the requirements and standards established by the Pittsburgh Public Schools, children are also given rubrics that enable them to better understand and therefore meet the expected criteria. Within the framework of this curriculum unit, students will meet and hopefully exceed the expected criteria. My objectives for students as they progress through the unit will be:

1. The student will be able to do independent research using the computer.
2. The student will be able to do independent research using the library.
3. The student will discuss humor and what is funny.
4. The student will formulate a list of terms related to the different types of humor.
5. The student will define terms related to humor.
6. The student will write a narrative about a funny experience.
7. The student will define injustice.

8. The student will formulate a list of injustices.
9. The student will write a narrative dealing with injustice.
10. The student will read plays; specifically comedies.
11. The student will write a play.
12. The student will produce a play.
13. The student will perform in a play.
14. The student will write a reflection discussing the use of humor as a method of dealing with injustice.

Strategies

Throughout the development of this unit, I will employ a number of strategies in order to meet the objectives I outlined and to assist students in reaching the standards.

In order to enable students to successfully complete the curriculum unit, it will be necessary to introduce them to the mechanics of comedy. This will be done in several different ways in order to keep the students interest level high.

First, I will lead the students in a discussion about what is funny. This teacher directed discussion would help students understand the different types of comedy and lead them to begin compiling a list of terms. Words the students might include are: puns, satire, jokes, slapstick, and parody to name a few. Students can then research and define the terms on the list. Another option would be to have students act out certain words on the list.

Another effective way to familiarize students with the mechanics of comedy is to have them write about the funniest thing that has ever happened to them or the funniest thing they've ever seen. Personalizing something is a very effective tool to use if you want the students to remember what you are teaching them.

A final method I would employ to ensure that my students had a solid understanding of comedy would be to expose the children to books. Books about puns, jokes, etc. would help to familiarize the students with humor. The students might then choose to write some of their own puns or jokes.

The next strategy I would employ in order to help students meet the objectives outlined in my unit is to introduce a discussion about injustice. This would be accomplished by discussing several of the stories found in the students' English Language Arts book. Students could also bring in books that deal with injustice and share them with their classmates. Generating discussions in this manner would lead to the next phase of the unit.

The next strategy I would employ in the development of my curriculum unit would be to generate a list of injustices. After reading books about injustice, the next logical step would be to formulate a detailed list of injustices. This list would be used to spark discussions and help children as they think about an injustice they would like to write about.

This second phase of strategy building would conclude with students publishing a narrative that deals with injustice. This narrative might be a personal narrative based on the student's own experience or it could be a fictional narrative. Whatever the choice the goal of this phase of the curriculum unit would be the incorporation of humor into the narrative. Students would attempt to write about a time they experienced an injustice but were able to use humor to help and diffuse the situation. By writing a narrative dealing with the topic of injustice, students are fulfilling requirements for their portfolios that are aligned with the district curriculum. Incorporating humor into the piece enables students to see the topic from a different perspective.

The final phase of the curriculum unit involves the students working cooperatively to write, produce, and star in a play. Initially, students would be involved in research. Samples of humorous plays would be presented for reading, analysis, and discussion. The strategy here would be to familiarize students with the mechanics of a play while at the same time exposing them to comic plays.

After allowing sufficient time for research and reflection, students would then begin the writing process. The actual writing of the play would take place in segments of time. Not all of the students would be required to participate in the writing of the play. Other students could be involved in other aspects of the plays production such as costume design, direction, etc.

Students would move on to the performance aspect of the play after writing has been completed. Students would perform in the play as a culminating activity. The performance would include the aspect of injustice but use humor as a way to teach about the concept.

As students work through the objectives outlined in the unit, they will be meeting the district standards outlined by the state and the Pittsburgh Board of Education.

The final strategy used in this curriculum unit would be the writing of a student reflection. This reflection would discuss the use of humor as a tool to deal with unfairness and injustice.

Classroom Activities

What follows is a detailed description of the activities I intend to use in order to bring this unit to fruition.

Activity 1- Introduction

Before actually beginning this or any other unit, it is important to check students' prior knowledge. Since this unit attempts to integrate two subjects, humor and injustice, which appear to be unrelated, it is very important to lay down the proper ground work. I will do this by beginning a teacher directed discussion about comedy. Specifically, I will ask students the question, "What is funny?" Using this question as a prompt, the class and I will generate a list. This list might include but would not be limited to terms such as parody, puns, satire, slapstick, jokes, etc. I would not expect students to know these exact words, but if they mentioned a particular television show or movie, I would explain which category it fell into. After building our list, I would then have the students begin to define the terms. This could be done by doing some research using the school computer lab. Each student would then share his or her research with the class. One effective way to do this could be to have students give examples of popular movies, television shows, or people who epitomize the word they were researching. For example, if one child was given the word slapstick to research, he/she might define the word and then explain that a television show such as The Carol Burnett Show as an example of slapstick. Showing a portion of the show would be another effective way for students to teach each other the meanings of the words. At this point, students might choose to act out their particular word instead of showing a portion of a television show or movie. Using the same word, slapstick, the student might choose to perform a short skit with a few classmates to demonstrate the meaning of the word. No matter which method students choose, I feel that having the students complete the research and having them be responsible for disseminating the information to fellow classmates will help students retain the information more readily.

Activity 2- Narratives

In order to continue to keep the students' interest level in the unit high, I would next have them write a narrative. Now that the students are familiar with terms related to comedy, I believe that relating the idea to their own experiences is the next logical step.

I would begin by having students share their funniest moments with the class. Sharing these personal memories is a great way to keep all of the students interested in the unit. I would then have students write a personal narrative describing their funniest moment. Since the writing of a personal narrative is a portfolio requirement, this is a great way to help students fulfill that requirement. After completing the writing process, students would share their narratives with the class.

Activity 3- Book Choice/ Book Review

Book Choice

A final method I would use to acquaint my students with the concept of comedy involves the selection and reading of books. I would introduce my students to different types of literature dealing with jokes, puns, etc. I would also have my students find some books and bring them in to share with the class. Each student would choose a book to read. After students read their book, I would have them share the contents with their classmates.

Book Review

After students complete the reading of their particular book, they would be required to complete a book review. This review might take any form. The list below could be used by students to help decide which type of book review they would like to complete.

Book report	Author probe
Book letter	Book talk
Annotated summary	Rate the text
Interview	Book recommendation
Spoke summary (song, rap, poem)	Write the next chapter

Students might choose from this list or create their own way to convey the contents of the book. Students would then share the book review with their fellow classmates.

Once students have completed the first three activities in the curriculum unit, I feel they will have a solid foundation on which to build for the future contents of the unit.

Activity 4- Discussion

Now that students have become familiar with humor and comedy, I will begin the next phase of my curriculum unit. Although it might seem unrelated, the next step in the unit is to introduce the concepts of fairness and injustice. I would begin a discussion about injustice and what is fair by referring to several of the stories in the English Language Arts book. From this discussion, I would have the students generate a list of injustices. This list might include some of the ideas below.

Racial prejudice	Ethnic discrimination
Sexual Discrimination	Weight discrimination

Being “different” from the group

Being falsely accused

Age discrimination

Religious discrimination

These are a few examples of some ideas students might brainstorm when generating their own list. Certainly the student-generated list would be more extensive than the sample above. After discussing the different injustices, students will be asked to begin thinking about times when injustice or unfairness touched their lives.

Activity 5- Narrative

Now that students have a list of injustices, the next step in the curriculum unit would be to use the list as a starting point from which to complete a narrative. The goal of this part of the unit is to have students write about an instance and how they used humor to deal with the injustice. By merging these two ideas, students will begin to realize the value of using humor to deal with unjust situations. The narrative the students compose should be non-fiction if possible. If students are unable to think of a real-life situation, they may write a fictional piece. After following the steps of the writing process, I would have students share their work. Because the nature of the subject might be sensitive for some students, orally reading the narrative pieces would be voluntary. The goal of this section of the curriculum unit is to make students aware of the fact that it is possible to use humor to deal with difficult and sensitive issues.

Activity 6- Research

Once students begin to see the link between humor and injustice, the curriculum unit will move into its final phase. This final phase begins with the introduction of plays. To be specific, I will introduce the students to comedies. The book Teenage Treasury of Good Humor by Sean Manley has an excerpt from Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, which I would use to introduce the students to comic plays. Because Shakespeare is often difficult to translate and understand, I would give the students background information about the play before reading it. I would then have the children read Act III, Scene 1 of the play. After discussing it with my students, I would give them the opportunity to act the scene out themselves. This would give them some beginning experience with acting in a comedy.

Now that I’ve introduced students to a comedy, I would have them conduct individual research. Each student would begin looking for a play. They would use the resources available in the school library, public library, and on the Internet. Ideally, the play would revolve around the theme of injustice. The characters would ultimately use humor as a mechanism to deal with the injustice they have encountered. Finding a play with this theme is not critical at this stage of the curriculum unit since ultimately, students will be writing their own play. The main objective at this juncture is to have

students become familiar with the different plays and playwrights and increasing their exposure to this type of literature.

The culminating activity to this phase of the unit will be to have students write a short reflection about the research they performed and the results of that research. Students will share their thoughts and ideas with their fellow classmates.

Activity 7- Writing/ Production/ Performance of a play

As the curriculum unit winds to a close, the completion of the various parts for this activity is crucial for success. Because every student cannot be a part of each section of this activity, the class will be divided into groups. Students will have the opportunity to decide which aspects of the activity they will take part in. Some may write the play, while other students design the sets and organize props. Still other students will perform in the play itself. All students will take part in at least one aspect of the play.

Writing

Now that the class has been exposed to the play as a form of literature, students will have the opportunity to begin writing their own play. The only stipulations will be that the play must portray a character or characters that must deal with injustice or an unfair situation and that same character or characters must use humor or comedy to help better deal with the problem. Other than those guidelines, students are free to be creative and write the type of play they find relevant to their life. Obviously, I will help to guide the students and offer suggestions when necessary. The goal, however, is to have the students write the play as independently as possible.

Production

This particular phase of the curriculum unit deals more with the actual production of the play. Students who wish to participate will be required to plan what costumes, if any, are used, what props, scenes, and other materials are needed for the successful stage production of the play. Again, I will direct students as necessary so that the written play and the production aspects of the play are compatible.

Performance of the Play

The culminating activity of this stage of the curriculum unit will be the actual performance of the play. Students will have the opportunity for rehearsal and will eventually perform for their peers. The goal here is two fold. Obviously, the student's hard work and practice should result in the performance of their play. The student body will be invited to watch the debut of this student driven production. The writing, production, and performance of the play will also help to fulfill several of the standards based portfolio requirements of the school district. Children will have the opportunity to fulfill writing and speaking, listening, and viewing requirements. A final goal that the students will achieve is the good feeling that comes from hard work and a job well done. There is no better way to get that feeling than to know you helped to create an original piece of literature and were able to share it with your fellow students.

Activity 8- Written reflection

As this curriculum unit, *Comedy in a Cruel World*, comes to an end, it is important to hear the students' final thoughts and feelings. I will initiate a group discussion with my students with regards to the different aspects of the unit and whether or not the students found them enjoyable. Suggestions for change or improvement might also prove helpful at this point. As a final closing activity, I will ask students to write a short reflection discussing the use of humor as a method of dealing with injustice. Students can reflect upon whether they feel humor is a viable way to deal with some of the unfairness and injustice they may have encountered. At this point students would have the opportunity to share their reflections with the class on a voluntary basis. Hopefully, the introduction of comedy, humor, and its many elements will serve as yet another method to help students deal with the many complicated and varied aspects of their lives.

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Appendix

Content Standards for the Pittsburgh Public Schools

Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.
3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform and persuade, in all subjects.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering question appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose, structure and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations from each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.
9. All students converse, at a minimum level of “Intermediate Low,” as defined in the oral proficiency guidelines developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, in at least one language other than English, including the native language if other than English, under Sec. 5.215© (relating to languages).
10. All students communicate appropriately in business, work and other applied situations.