

## Humor and Music in the Mathematics Classroom

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In the first meeting of my class in Quantitative and Qualitative Reasoning, many of the Liberal Arts students in this required course willingly admit to having math anxiety. With a large lecture hall full of students it isn't possible to deal individually with this problem, but it is necessary to respond in some way to these feelings. First, I assure my students that help with the course is available from me and also from two Learning Centers we are fortunate to have on our campus. Second, I tell them about a student in last semester's class who was so anxious that he wasn't able to sleep through any of my lectures. We all laugh a little and some of the tension is dissipated.

I also assure my students that you don't have to be a genius to succeed at mathematics. I tell them (tongue-in-cheek) that I didn't pass most of the math courses I took as a student. But I reassure them that I was always at the top of the group who failed.

There are two ways I attempt to help my students with their anxiety. The first is to try to guide the students into successful experiences in the course to build their self-confidence and convince them that they are capable of doing mathematics. The second approach, which is the focus of this presentation, is to inject appropriate humor into the classroom in an effort to relieve stress, anxiety, and antipathy, and to bring a little fun and interest to the experience.

Classroom humor comes in many forms and can include stories, jokes, cartoons, limericks, and yes, even songs. I'll provide you with some of my favorite resources for classroom humor and some samples of each. We will also consider how to fit a teachers favorite humor into the appropriate place in the course, and how to avoid some of the pitfalls of classroom humor.

The use of music as a vehicle for humor will be given particular emphasis. Yes, there are a few humorous songs with a mathematical theme that can be brought to class via CD and boombox. And if you play a musical instrument which is good for accompanying singing, you can summon your courage, bring it to class, and sing a song for (or with) your students. Generally speaking, students are a wonderful audience to amateur musicianship. They are delighted you are not lecturing on a new topic at the moment, and most of them are too polite to get up and leave.

I have found in the last few years that writing a song to meet your own classroom needs is not as difficult as it might sound. A simple procedure for this activity will be shared with attendees.

I wanted to come up with a song for my math students, which acknowledged how hard most of them were working, despite the fact that some would no doubt have preferred a root-canal session to taking a math course. A blues tune seemed the perfect choice. I selected the melody of a traditional song which is a favorite with many bluegrass bands and old-time string bands called Brown's Ferry Blues (Brown's Ferry is a small town in northern Alabama). The tune is called "The Mathematics Blues." I'll share it with you (with guitar accompaniment) and encourage attendees to join in. The chorus line, which is sung twice in each verse, goes "Lord, Lord, I've got the Mathematics Blues." All of my students (whom I encourage to sing along) seem to relate with delight to that sentiment. (I can't imagine why.)

If appropriately used, a little humor in the classroom can go a long way toward relieving the anxiety and stress of students and teachers alike. It can also put a more human face on the entire mathematical endeavor. As Mary Poppins rightly told us many years ago, a spoonful of sugar really does help the medicine go down.