



So this Circumference, this Diameter, and this Radius walk into a bar...

There is a joke that I have carried with me ever since my first year of teaching. It revolves around the story of three pieces of string that walk into a bar one day looking for refreshment. Although the details of the story change from telling to telling, the final punch line remains the same: "No, I'm a frayed knot!"

This past September, I launched into the story just as my Grade 8 students were arriving back from a morning recess break. The opening line, "So, these three strings walk into a bar," was met with a few sets of rolling eyes, two or three patronizing smiles, and a couple of protests that they had heard me tell this same story the year before. Undaunted and unshaken, I continued with increased enthusiasm and a little more elaboration. After delivering the punch line, I asked for some suggestions as to why jokes are so popular in our culture. Why do people tell jokes? Why do people like to hear them? Why have I remembered this particular joke for close to a quarter of a century?

Well, as Kieran Egan reminds us in his work on imaginative education, storytelling, including the telling of humorous stories and jokes, represents a very powerful way of engaging with the world. Jokes can help us grasp and communicate concepts on a much deeper level than if we simply read about them, or encounter them in the cold, matter-of-fact way that is the hallmark of many textbook presentations.

In past years, I have used this and other jokes as way of injecting a little humour into my classroom teaching. This year, however, we are working hard to use the creative dynamic offered by the arts to take us deeper into our teaching and learning. So, my students weren't really surprised when I used the joke as the beginning of a design task.

In our mathematics explorations, we had been trying to discover as much as possible about the measurement of circles. We had learned about the very intimate relationship that exists between radius, diameter, and circumference, expressed most beautifully through the 'pi factor'. As a type of formative assessment piece, I told students that their groups were

responsible for writing a joke that expressed what they had learned about circles. There were two stipulations: it had to be appropriate for all audiences, and it had to begin with the line, "So, this circumference, this diameter, and this radius walk into a bar."

Most groups had trouble getting started, but just when I thought that the whole idea was going to take a nose-dive, I started to hear ideas emerging from various parts of the room. Laughter and mathematical concepts began to fill the air – together – and things started to take off. Thirty minutes later, groups were up rehearsing their stories, making changes and designing simple props.

Over the years, I have always been an advocate for arts education, attempting to integrate drama, music, and dance into various aspects of my program and encouraging others to do the same. It is only in the past couple of years, however, that I have become aware of just how indispensable the arts actually are when you commit to teaching the 'whole child'.

In the past, I have used various art forms primarily as an alternative form of presentation, as a way of changing the pace in the classroom, or as a way to 'have fun'. Since beginning to explore more intensely how an arts-based, interdisciplinary learning environment might help us to engage those students who find themselves on the edge of this place we call school, I have discovered the immense power that the arts have to transform the way students walk around and uncover curriculum.

As I have gained confidence in my belief that the arts, like math and English, are powerful languages that allow us to explore and communicate our understanding of the world in very unique ways, I have seen an immense change in my students, in their parents, and in my own teaching self. And as we have started to attend to the connections between these languages, the learning has, quite literally, become awesome. On more than one occasion this year, we have all stopped, looked at each other and uttered a collective, "Woah!"

Returning to my circle story, I learned that by offering students the challenge to create a piece that was modeled after a powerful text form – one to which we don't usually assign official standing in our classrooms – I was able to witness their understanding in action. As for my students, they were able to talk about these new ideas in terms of relationships, a concept with which they are very familiar. The result was six funny, clever, and memorable mathematical stories that none of us will soon forget. As for punch lines, the class favourite was, "What? You mean, we're cousins?"

"So, this circumference, this diameter, and this radius walk into a bar..." What's your story? |

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