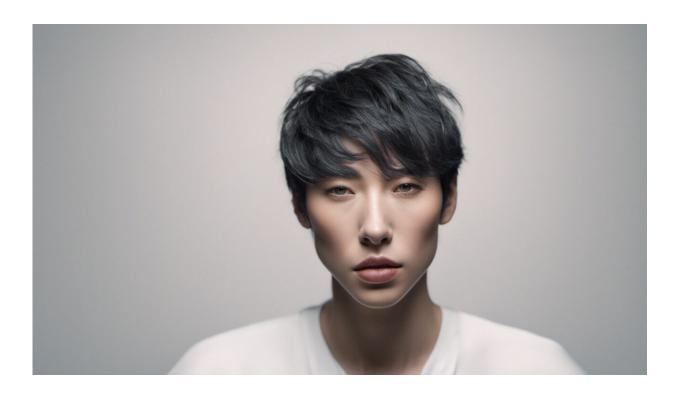


Why sarcasm is such a brilliantly inclusive and effective way to teach children—not

February 6 2018, by Richard Dunk



Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

The image of the sarcastic teacher is a common one. From the masterful speech given by Socrates at his trial for corruption (his "apology"), to the withering insults of Mr Gilbert on The Inbetweeners TV show, sarcasm and teachers seem inextricably linked.



Ignoring advice from handbooks and manuals, in my own work as a <u>teacher</u> I have often used sarcasm to highlight rule breaking ("Late again, Timmy? What was it this time, alien abduction or a volcano in your garden?") or challenge misunderstandings ("Oh yes, absolutely, clouds are definitely 100% made by steam from kettles"). And some believe that I was right to do so.

A <u>recent essay</u> in the Times Educational Supplement referenced a <u>study</u> that argued that sarcasm from trusted people "increases creativity without elevating conflict" and can act as a useful <u>teaching method</u>.

The teacher who wrote that essay said in a subsequent <u>interview</u> that sarcasm is one of many tools available to improve creativity in science lessons. But it is a conclusion I have some trouble accepting.

On a basic level, <u>sarcastic comments</u> are <u>more difficult to understand</u> than plainly spoken phrases. This would suggest that the use of sarcasm impedes learning rather than improving it.

And aside from the pro-sarcasm stance being based on just one or <u>two</u> studies, there are other significant issues surrounding its use as a teaching tool. First, it's not for children and, second, it's discriminatory.

Not suitable for children

The studies around sarcasm and creativity use participants aged 18-69. Unlike adults, who can discern sarcasm from context, children rely heavily on intonation to verify ironic suggestions or humorous exaggeration.

If sarcasm isn't identified by the "recipient" then it can seem misleading at best, cruel or damaging at worst. A study in <u>South African schools</u> concluded that sarcasm could be "a direct violation of fundamental rights



of learners to dignity", akin to corporal punishment. <u>One teacher</u> suggested that "sarcasm can be as destructive and painful as other forms of humour can be rejuvenating".

There is some <u>suggestion</u> that millennials may be particularly sensitive to sarcasm, and a negative interpretation may damage trust and create obstacles between "juniors" and those in positions of power.

The risk of damaging the pupil-teacher relationship is particularly high for teachers new to the profession, or those taking on new classes, since a lack of familiarity with the speaker makes sarcasm <u>more likely to go</u> undetected.

If sarcastic comments are undetected as humour, and subsequently interpreted as a true statement, then misunderstandings will abound.

School classrooms, labs, and workshops are inclusive places, where learners with different backgrounds and needs work in the same space. This variety makes sarcasm a questionable tool. Students with English as an additional language may struggle to either understand sarcasm due to a language barrier, or see sarcasm as wholly negative due to cultural differences.

People with learning disorders find it difficult to recognise and interpret sarcasm. An inability to understand a sarcastic situation has been seen in children with high-functioning <u>developmental disorders</u>, and children with ADHD have demonstrated specific <u>deficits</u> in comprehending paradoxical sarcasm.

If sarcasm is used in inclusive environments such as schools, teachers run the risk of communicating in a way that is alienating, misleading, or insulting.



Oh, so you think sarcasm is utterly evil...

Despite the many pitfalls, there may be positives to a careful use of sarcasm. Both using and receiving may indeed have a positive effect on creativity. In some cases sarcastic comments can serve as a "hook" to help people remember a particular fact or lesson. Where students "get" a teacher's comments, it strengthens relationships.

This would be particularly true for older students. Their brains have a more developed prefrontal cortex, which is an essential part of <u>understanding and interpretation of sarcasm</u>. In certain circumstances, sarcastic teacher comments are revered, and collected to be <u>shared more widely</u>.

Like much in education, the use of sarcasm in the classroom seems to be something of a double-edged sword. Sure, it may stimulate creativity and strengthen existing relationships, but it may also lead to feelings of exclusion. Given the minefield that a use of sarcasm presents, and range of safer ways in which <u>creativity may be encouraged in science</u>, my feeling is that giving in to sarcastic tendencies is probably best avoided.

So if you want to use <u>sarcasm</u> to improve <u>creativity</u> in education, go right ahead. I can't see that causing any problems for you at all ...

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