

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 [teacher](#) 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 [recent essay](#) in the Times Educational Supplement referenced a [study](#) that argued that sarcasm from trusted people "increases creativity without elevating conflict" and can act as a useful [teaching method](#).

The teacher who wrote that essay said in a subsequent [interview](#) 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, [sarcastic comments](#) are [more difficult to understand](#) 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 [two](#) 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 [South African schools](#) concluded that sarcasm could be "a direct violation of fundamental rights

of learners to dignity", akin to corporal punishment. [One teacher](#) suggested that "sarcasm can be as destructive and painful as other forms of humour can be rejuvenating".

There is some [suggestion](#) 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 [more likely to go 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 [developmental disorders](#), and children with ADHD have demonstrated specific [deficits](#) 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 [understanding and interpretation of sarcasm](#). In certain circumstances, sarcastic teacher comments are revered, and collected to be [shared more widely](#).

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 [creativity may be encouraged in science](#), my feeling is that giving in to sarcastic tendencies is probably best avoided.

So if you want to use [sarcasm](#) to improve [creativity](#) in education, go right ahead. I can't see that causing any problems for you at all ...

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