STORIES THAT TELL A JOKE

Mathematics is made of 50 percent formulas, 50 percent proofs, and 50 percent imagination. (Anonymous)

The Talmud says, “Start every lesson with a humorous illustration” (Pesachim, 117a). This is no less true for a lesson on mathematics. In Chapter 2 we mentioned humour as a desired component of a story, a component that can enhance both the telling and the hearing of a story. We have also exemplified how humour can be inserted, either as a situation that invites a smile or the choice of attributes or descriptors that are involved. It is likely that in previous chapters the reader has identified a variety of humorous undertones in our stories, regardless of whether or not we have explicitly pointed to them. For example, in choosing one’s outfit, we mentioned 37 hats. The impossibility of this raises a smile, but also helps in understanding mathematical ideas we wish students to acquire. We also mentioned earlier that Archimedes’ colleague Bartholomew retired to Jamaica and is making circles for the tourists. And, of course, there are countless opportunities to insert humour in stories that have not been mentioned. For example, what was farmer Jake doing as he waited for the crow to return to the barn? Maybe, he was just sitting there, dying of boredom. But maybe he surfed the internet to find information on how to get rid of a crow, or just to download rap music. We trust that the teacher, the story teller, will choose the appropriate activity of farmer Jake, which could be close to students’ current interests and appear unrelated to the “once upon a time” world of farmers. We believe that inserting pieces of information that may have little relevance to the mathematical ideas in the story contributes to creating humorous situations and ultimately helps in keeping students engaged as active listeners.

In this section we focus on a special kind of a short story – a joke – that is only rarely mentioned in education and is almost always ignored in mathematics education. We consider how carefully chosen jokes can contribute to classroom practice. Of course any kind of a joke, if appropriately selected and used, can contribute to a supportive atmosphere and good feelings, and as such, indirectly influence learning. But we discuss here a special kind of joke – a joke related to mathematics: mathematics learning, understanding, mathematical language and informal assessment.
There are three kinds of mathematicians: those who can count and those who can’t.

Of course this joke has a greater effect if told by a mathematician, one of those who can’t count. The humour in this case is a result of creating an expectation and then breaking it. Putting this differently, a necessary ingredient of humour is that two incongruous ways of viewing something (a person, a sentence or a situation) are juxtaposed.

Here are a few less-sophisticated examples, situated in the context of arithmetic.

Teacher: Name six animals of the Arctic region
Student: Three walruses and three polar bears

Student: Which is correct—five plus four is eleven or five plus four are eleven?
Teacher: Neither. Five plus four is nine.

Fran: Dad, can you help me find the greatest common denominator?
Dad: Good heavens, girl! Haven’t they found that yet? They have been looking for it since I was your age.

Teacher: If your father had ten dollars and you asked him for six dollars, how many dollars would your father have left?
Student: Ten
Teacher: You don’t know your maths.
Student: You don’t know my father.

Teacher: If you add 456 and 1098, what do you get?
Student: A wrong answer.

Question: Why did the math book commit suicide?
Answer: It had too many problems.

Egan (1997) notes that jokes can be used to make children reflect on the language they use and to create awareness of language. Similarly, mathematical jokes can point to the subtleties of mathematical language and to the subtleties of intention and the implicit underlying assumptions. Most efficient in this regard are jokes or riddles that require prior knowledge and acquaintance with a specific topic in order to fully appreciate them. Consider for example the following scenario:

Angry wife: You said you will be home by 11:45, now it is 3am!
Mathematically inclined husband: I said I will arrive at quarter of 12, I’m exactly on time, dear.