Jesters and Fools

a study guide to prepare for the assembly program
Alexander, King of Jesters
Dear Educator,

This study guide gives some historical background on jesters and is accompanied by some related exercises. Students can have a chance to try some of the jester’s talents, costuming and modes of thinking. It should also make any study of the time period from the middle ages to the Renaissance vibrant and fun.

On a deeper level, the exercises in this study guide, along with the assembly program you are about to see, celebrate *enhanced ways of communication*. When we have a conversation with someone, how much meaning is delivered through the words alone? Numerous studies indicate that our facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, eye contact, pacing, etc. easily convey as much information as the words we actually speak. The jester’s magical gibberish language is all about these non-verbal elements of conversation. There are exercises in this study guide designed to make students aware of those qualities that make us more effective speakers and more understanding listeners. A common theme among motivational speakers states that the quality of our life depends on the quality of our communication!

Finally, jesters actively court imagination and creativity without worrying so much about what others think of them. That is their nature. No, you do not need to implore your students to be wildly independent mavericks immune to society’s pressures. But fostering an ability to resist some peer pressure may have its merits!

If you discover anything on your own as you teach this material, or have any other comments, I would be delighted to hear from you.

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For more jester history, visit www.alexthejester.com
The History of Jesters

(Social Sciences)

The jester was a comic performer whose craziness, real or pretend, gave people a chance to laugh at the world and at themselves. Jesters were common from medieval times until the eighteenth century, and were the ancestor of the modern day clown. They would entertain audiences with a wide variety of skills. Some of their talents included dancing, juggling, playing instruments, rope walking, odd mouth sounds, funny faces, acrobatics, and joking with audience members. One of the most common qualities of jesters was that they were not at all afraid to be different. It was not just the way they looked but also the way they acted. They could get away with childish or unusual behavior that most people would dare not try, for fear of being teased, outcast or far worse.

There were two kinds of jesters:

1) **Fools** (or Buffoons): They entertained with tricks, music, broad comedy, stunts, and slapstick. They performed in the marketplace and during popular festivities. They traveled from town to town and amused people of many backgrounds. They were very common in their day since almost everyone likes to laugh, but of course in those days, there were no comics, cartoons, or funny movies.

2) **Court Jesters**: They entertained for the Royal court. Royalty, including Kings and Queens, were incredibly powerful in their kingdom. They were surrounded by people who respected them very highly, but often out of fear. These people told them only what they wanted to hear. Sometimes kings and queens got tired of this and would want to be entertained by someone who wasn’t afraid to be a little goofy or irreverent in front of them. The court jester had a better chance at getting away with teasing Royalty or stating a disagreeable opinion because they were expected to be a little strange. If a joke did not go over well, then the jester could always say, “Well, what do you expect? I really am just a crazy fool.”

In some ways, both fools and court jesters, (oftentimes one and the same) were very free because they did not feel the pressure to be the same as everybody else. But they also faced great risks if people did not think they were amusing.

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The Gibberish language: Grammelot

(Social Sciences and Language Arts)

Many jesters and fools spoke a gibberish language nobel prize winning playwright Dario Fo called Grammelot. It consisted of funny sounds along with a few real words from different languages. Although Grammelot could not say everything quite as clearly as a real language, it could express general ideas and it engaged people’s imaginations. It also turned out to be very practical for the following reasons:

Villages were very remote centuries ago. Many villages were very remote and separated by dark woods. The terrible roads made it hard to leave town, and without TV or radio, the peasants of one village may never hear the accent of people in the next town. As a result, even neighboring villages might not understand each other. Every town spoke a little differently, and so each town had their own dialect. Sometimes they spoke very differently, and had their very own language. Not surprisingly, there were far more languages than there are today.

Free speech was not a right centuries ago. In the days before mass media, it was the traveling performers who gave peasants much of their news of the outside world. If anyone said something that angered the king or queen, he or she could easily be thrown in jail. Performers were watched very closely by the censors. The censors were the people hired by the king or queen to make sure that nothing was said that could upset them or the royal court. If the jesters spoke Grammelot, the censors were less likely to give them a hard time, since nobody knew exactly what they were saying.
One of the most notable parts of the jester costume was the **curly boot**. This dates back to the early jesters who usually had physical deformities. A condition common in those days was “club foot”. The afflicted had misshapen feet that could not fit into normal shoes. Kings and queens were very **superstitious**, and believed that if they kept folks with clubfoot around, good luck would occur, and “the evil eye” would be avoided. Rather than try to hide their condition, many folks with clubfoot would wear big, outlandish footwear with exaggerated shapes. Jesters carried on this tradition, regardless of how their feet really looked.

Jesters had **floppy caps** with at least two “ears” and sometimes more. They were originally made with the ears of a donkey, which was considered the most foolish of all the domesticated animals.

Most jesters had costumes that were **asymmetrical**. This means that if you looked at their left side, their clothes had different colors or patterns from their right side. This distinguished them from most other people who usually wore clothes that were similar on both sides, or **symmetrical**. One explanation for this quality had to do with their split personalities. A jester has a really foolish side, but they also have a side that speaks great truth.

*One of the lessons jesters teach us is to ask questions that may seem too simple to bother with.* Some examples are: “Why does this rule exist?” or “Why must we act this way?” or “What would happen if...?”
Exercises

Try dressing like a jester!
(Standard 1: Creating Art)

Wear socks of different colors. Wear shoes that are too big, and maybe wear the right shoe on the left foot. Do you have a shirt that is asymmetrical? Does it have colors or patterns on the right side that are not found on the left side? If not, you could use your imagination and figure out a way to make it asymmetrical, such as wearing one sleeve long and wearing the other rolled up really high. Perhaps you can stuff something long and colorful in a pocket on one side. Wear a floppy hat with at least two ears or horns. One way to make a jester cap is to take an old pair of panty hose or long underwear, and tie a knot at each ankle. Put rolled up socks into each leg, and then turn it upside down and stretch the waistband onto your head. You will definitely feel as silly as a jester!

Try speaking like a jester!
(Standard 1 Creating Art, Standard 2 Art in Context, Standard 3 Art as Inquiry)

Speaking in gibberish
The jesters who traveled around between villages had to speak a universal gibberish language called grammalet. They could express simple ideas with just a few basic sounds. Try this exercise: find a partner and imagine that you are having the following simple conversation:

"Hello! How are you?"
"Not bad. How are you doing?"
"Good. Hey, I like your shirt."
"You mean this old thing?"
"Yeah! It looks way cool!"
"C'mon, You're kidding me!"
"No, really! It's awesome!"

But instead of using the actual English words, use just a couple words over and over again (box-car, napkin, bubble-gum) or use a nonsense sound (ex, ‘yabba dabba’ or ‘bugga-looga’) Also try using your hands more, make big faces, and change the tone of your voice. You may very well get people to understand what you’re saying even though you are not speaking a word of English. If you are really clever, see how long you and your partner can ‘talk’ without using any English words. Try acting like a salesperson trying to sell an object (knives, washing machine, car, snow board, or just about anything at all) using grammalet. Again, rely heavily on using your hands, tone of voice and facial expressions.
Use a Jester’s Imagination!
(Standard 1 Creating Art)

Roll Out and Become:
The students are all curled up on the floor (the neutral position) while the instructor beats a drum. Suddenly the instructor stops after a loud beat and calls out a thing for the students to become, such as the roots of a great oak, a fighter jet, a dinosaur, a worm, leaves in the wind, etc. The individual students immediately take a posture to “become” the thing. The students hold the position for just 10-15 seconds at which point the instructor resumes beating on the drum and they all return to the neutral position. If a drum is not available, a tambourine or something else can be substituted, or the teacher could turn a light switch on and off.

Join together and Become:
The above exercise is also a great team-building activity. Instead of the students individually becoming a thing, have the students each “become” a PART of the thing. For example, for the dinosaur: one student could be the tail, another the back, others the legs and another the neck and head. To practice non-verbal communication, have students try it without speaking. Encourage your students to use their imaginations to think of things they can join together to become.

These exercises give students practice at going with their instincts and using their imaginations. The exercises are designed to move quickly so that the students do not try to copy someone else. The quickness also allows them to play freely without inhibition. As a result, they can explore imaginative possibilities without judgment.

Using Common Objects in Clever Ways:
Pick a simple object and pass it around the room. Each student must think of a use for it for which it was not originally intended. For example, a broom could be a laundry rack, a conductor’s baton, a giant’s toothbrush, a device to save drowning people, etc.

As an alternative method, sit in a semi-circle and put the object in front. Then any student inspired by an idea can grab the object and improvise with it for a few seconds and say what they are doing with it. The creativity can be astonishing as the students are free to bound forward whenever they are inspired. Shy students may require extra encouragement and they may choose not to participate.
Try Thinking Like a Jester!
(Standard 3 Art as Inquiry)
Ask some “what if” questions. Here are some examples just to get you started:
• What if you had to crawl everywhere you went? Would you wear special shoes for your knees? Would skiing or skating be just as exciting? Easier or harder? How would you make the inside of a car?
• What if you were hollow inside and could keep anything you want nice and dry inside your belly. What would you keep in there?
• What if you could pick classes on any subjects? What would you choose? Would you study ant farms? Karate? Electric guitar? Space travel?
• What if you could only watch TV while you were taking a bath? Would you take more baths? Watch less TV?
• What if you could put absolutely anything you want to eat between two pieces of bread, what would you choose? What would you name your new sandwich?
• What if your parents had to ask you permission before they did anything? Would you act any differently? How would you punish them if they disobeyed? If you sent them to their room, would they be sad?
• How would a jester clean his/her room? Would it be fun? Could you clean your room using your toes? Your elbows? Your mouth? A hose from a fire-truck?

Try an entertaining skill!
(Standard 1 Creating Art)
• Can you balance a yardstick on your hand? If you can find a peacock feather, that is still impressive, but a lot easier
• Try balancing on one foot, looking up at the ceiling, then closing your eyes and touching your nose. Just keep on trying if you don’t get it at first. You can do it!
• Say the following tongue twisters ten times fast:
  She sells seashells down by the seashore
  The sixth sheik’s sixth sheep’s sick
  Unique New York
  Toy Boat
Entertaining skills (continued)

• Try making silly faces (ex: super happy, totally sad, cheeks puffed out with wide eyes, puckered lips, etc.) Learn to make at least three in a row quickly. When you can do that, cover your face completely with both hands, quickly make another funny face under the cover of your hands and let go. Voila! Repeat over and over. It looks like your hands are changing your face!

• Jesters and fools PRACTICED entertaining skills, including dancing, instrument playing, juggling, balancing, joke telling, singing, rope walking, and kidding around with audience members. These skills require lots of practice. Many of you may already possess one of these talents and may be willing to spend the time to learn new ones.

When you watch Alexander, you will notice that he does many tricks that look very difficult. Was he born talented? Guess again! All the skills he does in his show he developed by practicing a little bit at a time. He has found that it is not so important to practice for long stretches of time, but that it is extremely helpful to practice regularly, ideally a little bit every day.

Jester Vocabulary words
(Language Arts)
non-verbal communication
medieval
gibberish
dialect
remote
censor
superstitious
asymmetrical
symmetrical
Where can you see jesters and fools today?

- Shakespearean plays *King Lear, Hamlet, As you like it* and *All's well that Ends Well*
- Movies, such as Disney's animation *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or Danny Kaye plays one in the feature, *The Court Jester* (highly recommended!)
- Light opera, such as Gilbert and Sullivan's "Yeoman of the Guard".
- A popular book with young readers today is *The Jester Lost His Jingle* by David Saltzman.
- Perhaps the easiest place to find a picture of a jester or fool would be in a deck of cards!

Can jesters be found in other cultures?

African slaves derived hope and endurance from tales that featured the clever *trickster* whose antics always got the better of the slave owners. A Yiddish wedding had a jesting *badchen* who entertained the bride and groom as if they were king and queen. The Turkish *Nasreddin Hodja* was a funny folk philosopher who poked fun at the elite and would ride his donkey back words. The Native American's *Kokopelli*, The Mongols *Shagdar*, Japan’s *Dokashi*, all shared a funny, mischievous character who was an outlet for people to laugh at social conventions, the high and mighty, or just simple slapstick.

Throughout time, the aspiring jester had needed to learn the value of practicing his or her craft through tireless practice. Beyond this, every aspiring jester needed to know that a key to success was to be keenly aware of picking the right place and right time to entertain! This was the difference between being loved throughout the land, or languishing in the dungeon. Sometimes it is a fine line, and we hope you appreciate that the jester respects where that line is, but plays near its edges!

*Alexander O'Brien Feldman has devoted his life to being a jester. In addition to school programs, he has performed at International events in Canada, France, Belgium, Bermuda, Japan, Australia, Singapore and New Zealand. For more information, visit www.alexthejeser.com*