

## **April Fools!**

By *CATHERINE HUTCHINGS AND JAVAID KHAN*

**Overview of Lesson Plan:** In this lesson, students reflect on their reactions to practical jokes. They discuss the social function and personal benefits of practical jokes by contrasting good jokes with bullying and harassment. Then, they create mock scenario proposals for a good-spirited prank television show episode.

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**Suggested Time Allowance:** 1 hour

### **Objectives:**

Students will:

1. Reflect on their reaction to a simple and harmless practical joke.
2. Learn about the psychological and social effects of pranks by reading and discussing the article “April Fool! The Purpose of Pranks.”
3. Analyze examples of practical jokes; design their own “good” practical jokes and devise a mock scenario for a comedy television show.
4. Write up and prepare to “pitch” the practical joke proposal.

### **Resources / Materials:**

- pens/pencils/markers
- classroom board
- student journals
- copies of the article “April Fool! The Purpose of Pranks,” found below (one per student)
- if possible, video clips of practical jokes (suggested below)

### **Activities / Procedures:**

1. **WARM-UP/DO NOW:** Prior to class, arrange to play a simple practical joke on students. For example, you may announce a new school rule such as the following: “Starting tomorrow, the school will designate one hour a day as a “gossip-free” hour, the beginning and end of which will be announced over the loudspeaker. During this time, no one may gossip or speak ill of anyone else.”

Observe students’ reactions as they respond to this new school rule. Announce that it is a practical joke before students become too upset. (To learn about a high school that is actually implementing this rule, read the New York Times article “Weaning Teenagers Off Gossip, for One Hour at a Time,” found online at

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/27/nyregion/27gossip.html>.)

Next, have students reflect on the experience by responding to the following prompt in their journals: “What was your initial reaction to the fake announcement? How did your emotions

change as you discovered that you had been fooled? What did you learn about yourself? How will you, if at all, change your behaviors moving forward?"

After a few minutes, invite students to share their journal entries with the class. Explain that they will be reading an article that further explains the psychology and social function of practical jokes.

2. As a class, read and discuss the article "April Fool! The Purpose of Pranks" ([http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured\\_articles/20080401tuesday.html](http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/20080401tuesday.html)), focusing on the following questions:

- a. Why do people play practical jokes on each other?
- b. What functions, from an anthropological point of view, do pranks serve among social groups around the world?
- c. What are the characteristics of each of the three categories of pranks described by Abbie Hoffman?
- d. Based on your own prior knowledge, what "human fears and failings" might be humorous fodder for a good prank?
- e. What psychological benefits can arise from being duped?
- f. According to the article, what are the necessary requirements to design and carry out a "good" practical joke?
- g. What is counterfactual thinking and how does it facilitate personal growth and improvement?
- h. In your opinion, does the article provide a justification for bullying and/or hazing? Why or why not?

3. Explain that students will be using examples of practical jokes to further reflect on and discuss the psychology of pranks. Then, working in small groups, they will design a practical joke for a television comedy show episode that would clearly be categorized by Abbie Hoffman as a "good" prank. An alternate writing exercise is also suggested below. Begin by asking students to share stories about "good" pranks that have been played on them or that they have played on others. Or, show a clip of a famous or public prank, such as those seen in movies, TV shows, and in the news.

Possible clips include:

-clip from a "Friends" episode where the characters play jokes on each other to prove a point ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ev\\_ob4mVwg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ev_ob4mVwg))

-clip from "Legally Blonde" where Reese Witherspoon's character is tricked into arriving at a party in a costume ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hb5\\_9cDY3ys](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hb5_9cDY3ys)) NOTE: contains some inappropriate language

-"Seinfeld" episode where Jerry's joke of putting a Pez dispenser on Elaine's leg during a concert has unexpected results

([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLnl8pQ4\\_HU&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLnl8pQ4_HU&feature=related) and minutes 3:28 to 3:50 of <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zqa44fpwa0&NR=1>) NOTE: contains some adult content after minute 3:50

As a class, analyze each prank using the following discussion questions (written on the board or provided as a handout):

- How would you categorize the prank, using Abbie Hoffman's classification scheme, and why?
- What human traits or failings (arrogance, vanity, curiosity, etc.) are highlighted by the joke?
- What was the initial reaction of the subject? How did his or her reaction change over time?
- What counterfactual insights might the "target" have learned through the experience? In what way, if at all, did it "kick-start" personal improvement?
- In your opinion, does this prank "go too far" or not and why? Is this an example of bullying or "good fun" and why?

After students have discussed and analyzed some practical jokes, have them use their insights to plan and design their own "good" prank for a television comedy show.

**(Alternatively, this lesson may be compressed into a student writing exercise, in which, in lieu of television scenarios, students write an open-ended response on "good" and "bad" practical jokes, drawing from the class discussion, provided questions and their personal experiences.)**

Divide students into small groups. Students should pretend they are submitting a script/scenario proposing a good practical joke for a "candid camera" show, a celebrity prank show or an episode of their favorite sitcom. Have students begin by deciding together what show to write an episode for and which characters will appear in it. Then they should consider the following questions as they develop their pranks (distributed in a handout):

#### Section 1: Scene

- Who will be the subject or "target" of your joke?
- Who are the key players? Who is "in" on the practical joke and who will be (an) innocent bystander(s)?
- What is the premise of the joke?
- Where and how will the joke take place?
- How will the joke be set up and implemented for the camera?
- What dialogue will take place in the scene?

## Section 2: Humor

- What makes this prank funny?
- Why should your prank be considered a “good” joke by Abbie Hoffman’s standards?
- What human traits or failings of the subject are highlighted by the joke? What about this character is being “sent up” with this joke?
- How will you know when it has gone far enough? At what point or for what reasons would you stop the joke?
- Would you yourselves be okay with being on the receiving end of this joke? Why or why not?

## Section 3: Psychology and Sociology/Anthropology:

- Have you tempered your prank with the right amount of “emotional intuition”? Why do you think so or how do you know?
- What is the sociological outcome of the joke? For example, is it a type of flattery, a coming-of-age ritual or an invitation to be part of a group? Does it teach a lesson or is it some other expression of social boundaries?
- What do you predict will be the reaction of the person fooled?
- What personal awareness or self-improvement might be triggered by the prank?

Before the end of class, have groups divide up the work, by section, for individual completion as homework. Depending on class and group size, more than one student may be assigned to work on each section.

4. WRAP-UP/HOMEWORK: Individually, students use their group’s classwork to write up their assigned sections for the prank proposal. In a future class, have students compile their sections into a completed proposal. Invite students to “pitch” their prank ideas to the class, with the rest of the class acting as television executives. Conclude with a discussion on the differences between good and bad practical jokes, highlighting how this is sometimes a difficult distinction to make.

### **Further Questions for Discussion:**

- In your opinion, what types of practical jokes “go too far” or “play too hard” on an individual’s weaknesses or insecurities? Who are good targets for practical jokes, and who should be spared?
- What types of things are “fair game” for pranksters?
- What is the difference between bullying and joking?
- What have your reactions been to being duped?

### **Evaluation / Assessment:**

Students will be evaluated based on participation in the initial exercise, thoughtful participation and discussion of the article, analysis and design of a good practical joke and completion of one section of a mock scenario proposal for homework.

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## **April Fool! The Purpose of Pranks**

**By BENEDICT CAREY, New York Times**

Keep it above the belt, stop short of total humiliation and, if possible, mix in some irony, some drama, maybe even a bogus call from the person's old flame or new boss. A good prank, of course, involves good stagecraft. But it also requires emotional intuition.

"You want to play on people's weaknesses or dislikes, but not go too hard," said Tommy Doran, a fireman and paramedic in Skokie, Ill., who as a rookie in Montgomery County, Md., was lured into the station's kitchen and blasted with multiple cream pies. "For me it's just the sort of dark humor we use to cope with the job and each other. Nothing dangerous or illegal."

Psychologists have studied pranks for years, often in the context of harassment, bullying and all manner of malicious exclusion and prejudice.

Yet practical jokes are far more commonly an effort to bring a person into a group, anthropologists have found — an integral part of rituals around the world intended to temper success with humility. And recent research suggests that the experience of being duped can stir self-reflection in a way few other experiences can, functioning as a check on arrogance or obliviousness.

The 1960s activist and prankster Abbie Hoffman reportedly divided practical jokes into three categories. The bad ones involve vindictive skewering, or the sort of head-shaving, shivering-in-boxers fraternity hazing that the sociologist Erving Goffman described as "degradation ceremonies." Neutral tricks are more akin to physical punch lines, like wrapping the toilet bowl in cellophane, depositing a massive pumpkin on top of the student union building, or pulling some electronic high jinks on a co-worker's keyboard (though on deadline this falls quickly into the "bad" category).

What Hoffman called the good prank, which humorously satirizes human fears or failings, is found in a wide variety of initiation rites and coming-of-age rituals. The Daribi of New Guinea, for example, have children make a small box and bury it in the ground, telling them that after a while a treasure will appear inside but they must not peek, according to Edie Turner, a professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia.

Invariably the youngsters succumb to curiosity — only to find a sample of human feces.

The Ndembu of Zambia have an adult in a monstrous mask sneak and scare the wits out of boys camping outside the village as part of a coming-of-age ritual in which they are showing their bravery.

"These kind of tricks are very common," Dr. Turner said, "and they are really a way to put a person down before raising them up. You're being reminded of your failings even as you're being honored."

Jonathan Wynn, a cultural sociologist at Smith College, said pranks served to maintain social boundaries in groups as various as police departments and sororities. “And you gain status by being picked on in some ways,” he said. “It can be a kind of flattery, if you’re being brought in.”

In a paper published last year, three psychologists argued that the sensation of being duped — anger, self-blame, bitterness — was such a singular cocktail that it forced an uncomfortable kind of self-awareness. How much of a dupe am I? Where are my blind spots?

“As humans, we develop this notion of fairness as a part of our self-concept, and of course it’s extremely important in exchange relationships,” said Kathleen D. Vohs, a consumer psychologist at the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Vohs and her co-authors, Roy F. Baumeister of Florida State University and Jason Chin of the University of British Columbia, propose that the fear of being had is a trait that varies from near-obliviousness in some people to hypervigilance in others.

The researchers had 55 men and women play a computerized cooperation game and demonstrated that participants who felt they had been burned would go over the experience in their heads, playing out alternative versions of how they might have behaved.

“Being duped holds up this mirror to people,” Dr. Vohs said, “and may in fact show them where they are on the scale” — too trusting or too vigilant. Paranoia, too, has its costs, and it can sour relationships.

Running back the tape mentally, in this case meditating on how an embarrassing event might have turned out otherwise, is known to psychologists as counterfactual thinking. “The feeling of ‘I should have known better’ is the sort of counterfactual that serves to highlight your own shortcomings,” said Neal Roese, a psychologist at the University of Illinois. “A good deal of research has shown that these counterfactual insights can kick-start new behaviors, new self-exploration and, ultimately, self-improvement.”

Those observations may not leap to mind if you just showed up in go-go boots and an Elizabeth Taylor wig to a bogus 1970s cross-dressing party. Or if you fell for the e-mail message announcing you had won an award and should forward a draft of your acceptance speech to a supervisor.

But a good prank is, in the end, a simulation of a crisis and not the real thing. And it serves as a valuable reminder that not every precious box contains precisely the treasure you might expect.

**Vocabulary:**

irony, bogus, stagecraft, intuition, lured, pranks, malicious, integral, rituals, temper, duped, self-reflection, check, vindictive, skewering, degradation, high jinks, satirizes, coming-of-age, succumb, wits, status, self-awareness, self-concept, exchange relationships, burned, paranoia, counterfactual, highlight, simulation

**Extension Activities:**

1. How are pranks and gags used to mark milestones in life? Why are pranks being incorporated into formerly serious moments, such as marriage proposals? What might psychologists have to say about this practice? Write an analysis of your research.

2. What are common pranks from different cultures around the world? Do different cultures have varying perceptions of what is funny and acceptable? Make a chart comparing similar pranks from different cultures.

**Interdisciplinary Connections:**

**American History** – One of the most famous pranks of all time involves an important historical landmark in the United States: in 1996 the fast-food chain Taco Bell claimed that it had bought the Liberty Bell and was renaming it the Taco Liberty Bell. Until it was revealed as a hoax, many people were outraged. Why did people have such a strong response? Did this joke go too far? Why or why not? Read news articles from the time period and write a paper analyzing Americans' feelings about historical landmarks.

**Global History** – What theories describe the origin of April Fool's Day? Where did it possibly arise and how did its practice spread? What were common practical jokes of medieval times, 100 years ago, and today? Make a timeline showing the development and progression of April Fool's Day throughout history.

**Other Information on the Web:**

Lists of friendly pranks, practical jokes and hoaxes of all types can be found online at <http://www.pranksite.com/> and <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/index.asp?Area=search>).  
<http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/>