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COMIC TEACHES LESSON ON HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM *Comedy is an effective tool in teaching*

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They came to become comically enlightened.

There were 30 of them in all. High school teachers, museum docents, special education teachers and corporate trainers all with one common goal -- become more effective at reaching their charges through humor.

They hoped a recent day-long seminar offered at Paradise Valley Community College could help them realize that goal.

One student, Debra Kirkpatrick, who will teach English at Mountain Trail Middle School this fall, said she goes out of her way to be effective in the classroom.

"I sing, I dance, I trip over my feet," she laughed. "I do everything I can to keep their attention."

While Ms. Kirkpatrick came into the seminar with the notion to stretch her student-to-teacher communication skills, others were searching for the initial spark to get the comedic torch of communication lit.

"I'm looking for the magic formula to reach each and every one of my students," said Kathleen Cox, a 32-year educator and English teacher at Chaparral High School.

It was the task of lecturer, stand-up comedian and performance coach Tim Davis to give these instructors the tools of classroom effectiveness.

Mr. Davis has worked as a stand-up comedian for 20 years and has now branched into the teaching side of his industry. He coaches actors, salespeople, writers and comics to overcome self-defeating habits to gain confidence. He helps them to locate their funny bone too.

Instead of hearing a bevy of one-liners they could use in their classrooms, the group was taught psychological techniques to help them work on themselves first.

Negative thought patterns, rationalizing failure and strict adherence to personal rules are all poison when it comes to being an effective communicator, according to Mr. Davis.

His philosophies are simple.

"Our core belief systems about ourselves dictate our actions and our reactions," he said. "Through disputing irrational thoughts and the elimination of alibis, we can affect changes in our students and in ourselves. By giving up control, we get control."

The practice is called the Socratic method of teaching and follows the technique utilized by Greek philosopher Socrates.

For example, it is Mr. Davis' belief that disruptive behavior by a student in class can be a positive thing if the teacher uses the disruption to reach the student. He used hecklers as an illustration of his theory.

"A lot of comedians love hecklers," he said. "They have somebody to talk to."

He said this theory can be applied in the classroom.

"If a kid is yelling out in class it only means he is working out emotions," he said. "So, instead of saying 'shut up and be quiet' the teacher can look at it as a chance to help."

Another possible response is to focus on the student who are listening rather than the ones who are no.

"Zero in on the ones who are listening and have confidence the others will catch on and ask 'what am I missing?'" he said.

It is also imperative, according to Mr. Davis, teachers teach in all three learning styles -- verbal, visual and kinesthetic.

This way, he said, a teacher can reach every student in the class.

"The best performers are three-level performers," he said. "Steve Martin, Richard Pryor, Carol Burnett and Lucille Ball communicate verbally, physically and emotionally."

Mr. Davis also taught the group secrets for connecting to their comedic talent.

Taking risks, proper timing and creating material in the moment will now serve as communication tools for the instructors.

"You can only succeed to the level you are willing to fail," he said.

Mr. Davis has taught his special brand of comedy techniques and confidence building at UCLA, New York University and The Learning Annex as well as comedy clubs in Phoenix and New York City.

His techniques have been featured in The New York Times, The New York Daily News and on PBS and CBS's "48 Hours."