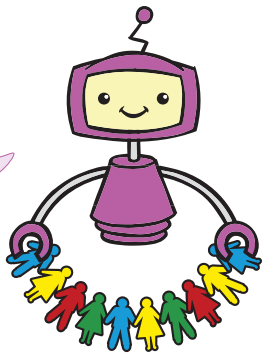
MODULE 6: WORK SHEET 1

The last laugh

LINKS TO:
Stage 3, Module 6
Learning Object 2: *What's so funny about that?*

Have you ever told a joke that fell completely flat? I wonder if people in Indonesia share the same sense of humour as Australians. Let's find out more about what makes people laugh and think about what makes you laugh.



1 Laughter is the best medicine

Everybody loves humour. It makes us laugh and, as they say, laughter is the best medicine. However, as you know, not everyone laughs at the same things.

Humour, like most shared cultural experiences, is informed by our attitudes, values and beliefs. Often, humour operates by drawing attention to absurd behaviour we take for granted, or by inverting relationships or situations we believe are 'normal'.

It is difficult to identify cultural differences in what people find funny. As individuals, humans appreciate a wide range of different types of humour. However, you can stand back and take a look at the stories, jokes, cartoons, and so on, of a culture and get a general sense of what most people think is funny.

2 Types of humour

Have you heard or seen something funny today? Perhaps a friend told you a joke, or forwarded a link to a funny video? Maybe you watched a television program or movie that made you laugh, or read a funny book.

Humour is difficult to define, and to break down into categories, but there are some common types with which you are probably familiar.

Jokes

A joke is a form of verbal humour. Jokes commonly take the form of short narratives, or of questions and answers, containing a humorous twist in the ending.

For example:

'Knock, knock'
'Who's there?'
'Isabel.'
'Isabel who?'
'Is a bell really necessary on a bicycle?'

(Most 'knock-knock' jokes include a pun, which is a play on words. In this case, the name 'Isabel' becomes the phrase 'is a bell'.)

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Practical jokes

A practical joke is a physical rather than a verbal form of humour. In Australia, we sometimes play practical jokes, or pranks and tricks, on our friends and family, or one group may play a joke upon another similar group such as university students.

Practical jokes are aimed at creating a ridiculous situation that plays on the victim's particular personality, interests or habits, or at tricking them into behaving in a certain manner. Such jokes are largely harmless, and while they are sometimes embarrassing for the victim, they should not humiliate people or cause undue distress. For example, a 'whoopee' cushion might be placed on your mother's chair during Christmas dinner.

Slapstick humour

Slapstick, also a form of physical comedy, is a type of humour that uses exaggerated movements and expressions, often mimicking violent behaviour (such as slapping or poking) or accidental injury (such as slipping on a banana skin).

Physical activities that aren't possible to survive in real life, such as a character falling from a tall building, landing on a café canopy, and leaping onto the back of a moving motorcycle, feature in slapstick comedy. Other examples include circus clowns, *Tom and Jerry* cartoons, and *Punch and Judy* puppet shows. John Cleese, Jim Carrey and Rowan Atkinson are famous comedians who use slapstick humour.

Satire

Satire is a more subtle, targeted type of humour, usually with a political or social subtext. In satire, the affectations or the vices of particular groups or professions are exposed by exaggerating mannerisms, points of view, and pretensions. Irony and sarcasm are the tools of effective satire. Irony occurs when a person states the opposite of what is actually meant (such as describing someone as 'honourable', when you want to imply the opposite). Sarcasm is the use of cutting irony, intended as criticism. As social or political comment, satire draws attention to the gap between our expectations and reality.

Satire and parody (an exaggerated imitation of something) are powerful social and political tools. Charlie Chaplin's 1940 comedy *The Great Dictator* was a parody of the rise of Adolf Hitler, and outraged diplomats by poking fun at the Nazis.

'Taking the mickey' is an integral part of Australian humour, and an enduring feature of Australian film and television. You might be familiar with examples such as *Kath and Kim* (a satire of Australian suburban life), *The Chaser* (a satire of Australian and international news broadcasting), and 'mockumentaries' such as *Summer Heights High* and *We Can Be Heroes: Finding The Australian of the Year*, both by Chris Lilley. (A mockumentary is a fake documentary that parodies the documentary form).

Bad jokes

The use of deliberately 'unfunny' humour is strongly entrenched in Australian culture. This comedy style is evident in families or friendship groups, when a person takes on the 'straight man' persona, and the jokes are about them because they appear to be naïve or incapable of understanding subtext. There is an element of self-deprecation, sometimes even subversive criticism of the audience, in a good 'bad joke'.

This style of humour is showcased in television programs and movies like *The Castle* and *The Dish*.

That's sooo not funny

Some forms of humour can offend people. Because humour draws on stereotypes, and may poke fun at our values, attitudes or beliefs, it can be controversial, and even destructive.

Humour, and the laughter it provokes, can throw a harsh spotlight on injustice, but it also can be used to cast ridicule upon people because of their race, gender, culture or religion.

3 Indigenous humour

Australian Indigenous people share a love of humorous stories and jokes. Although there are many localised differences in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, there are also some notable similarities in their use of humour.

One aspect of humour common to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is the use of observation and mimicry, or 'spoofing'. The explorer Watkin Tench wrote one of the earliest written records of this type of Indigenous humour. In his memoir, *Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson* (1788), he writes about a day spent exploring with a group of white men, guided by Aboriginal men. During the day, the party had made a series of mistakes. The white men had stumbled and fallen, lost their way and mislaid supplies. At the end of the day, the group made camp and the Aboriginal guides performed a corroboree dance for the white men. The dance included humorous mimicry of each of the white men's foibles and failures, as well as some of their own.

Another feature of Indigenous humour is the use of what is sometimes called deadpan, gallows or 'black' humour. This is humour that defuses the seriousness of a situation, or an individual, by poking fun at it. Some commentators have noted the similarity between this aspect of Indigenous humour and Jewish humour, observing that many cultures that have suffered oppression develop a similarly wry and caustic form of humour. This type of humour is both political — it draws attention to oppression — and comforting, since it takes some of the sting out of tragedy.

4 What's so punny about that?

While Indonesians enjoy a wide variety of styles of humour, as we do in Australia, perhaps the most popular style throughout the Indonesian archipelago is slapstick humour. Slapstick humour can be seen on television programs and in live theatre. It can be traced far back in history to when the ancient shadow puppet theatre — still much a part of Indonesian life today — played out stories from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. In it, four clown-servants, *Semar*, *Gareng*, *Petruk* and *Bagong* provide the audience with eagerly anticipated comic relief as they make use of puns, slapstick, practical jokes and clever insinuations. These figures also feature in live performances with live actors providing similar entertainment.

In the 1950s, a comedy group called *Srimulat* roamed from town to town in Java, and by the 1960s had become popular throughout the island. Though the group no longer performs, its unique style of slapstick humour still remains popular to this day.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a trio of comedians, Dono, Kasino and Indro, heavily influenced by the slapstick of *The Three Stooges*, starred in a number of very popular films. While the films were primarily slapstick humour, they also incorporated clever word play. This was more evident in their radio show *Prambors*. Dono, Indro and Kasino, as university graduates, adopted parody and social criticism, another popular style of humour, which was more suited to radio than the visual slapstick of their films.

Dono, Indro and Kasino traversed the divide between overt visual slapstick and the more subtle humour of word play, puns and insinuation. This is another popular form of Indonesian humour — playing with words and acronyms and parodying those in positions of political power. In Indonesia this is called *plesetan*.

An example of word play, or *plesetan*, is the variation of the acronym *berdikari* (*berdiri atas kaki sendiri* means standing on one's own feet, to be self-reliant). In the 1960s this was popularly changed to mean *berdiri di kaki kiri* (standing on the left foot) and was intended as a swipe at the then President Sukarno's leftist leanings, and the inherent imbalance in standing

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on the 'left', in the same way that standing on one's left foot is a difficult thing to do without overbalancing.

Under the current democratic system of government, where there is more freedom of expression allowed in the mass media, this style of humour is far more apparent than under the more authoritarian governments of Sukarno's Guided Democracy and Suharto's New Order governments. Then, humour was very much alive, albeit disguised. This style of ridicule stems back to the days of Dutch administration when skilful shadow puppeteers, *Dalang*, would ridicule the Dutch authorities through clever word play and parody.

A more contemporary form of *plesetan* comes from the rock band *Punkasila* — a group of graduates from the Indonesian Arts Institute in Yogyakarta. Their band name is a play on the word *Pancasila*, the five guiding principles of Suharto's New Order government. Their repertoire includes variations on well-known acronyms.

For example:

PNU: *Partai Nahdlatul Ummat* (the Islamic Awakening Party) is made into *Partai Nunut Udud* (the Party for Taking Cigarettes from your Friends)

PKI: *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (the Indonesian Communist Party) is made into *Partai Kaos Indonesia* (the Chaos Party of Indonesia)

Television chat shows featuring comedians as hosts are also popular. The most popular is the program *Bukan Empat Mata* hosted by Tukul Arwana, a Javanese comedian. The show follows a similar format to western shows such as David Letterman's *The Late Show*.

Exercises

Exercise 1

Do you have a sense of humour? Let's find out.

1.1 Use the table below to list some of the books, movies and television programs that you find humorous.

Books	Movies	TV programs

1.2 Do you know any great jokes? Write your favourite joke below.

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1.3 Look at your list in Exercise 1.1, and at your joke in Exercise 1.2. Can you identify any common threads? For example, are they from a particular country or culture? What styles or types of humour can you identify?

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1.4 Ask your friends or family about their favourite funny books, movies, television programs and jokes.

Compare your sense of humour with your friends or family. Are there differences, or do you share the same sense of humour? Use examples to illustrate your answer.

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1.5 What does your sense of humour, as demonstrated by your selections in Exercise 1.1, say about your personality, and your personal attitudes, values and beliefs?

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Exercise 2

2.1 How would you explain the differences, if any, between Australian and Indonesian humour?

2.2 What values, attitudes and beliefs are reflected in the dominant types of Indonesian humour?

2.3 An ability to appreciate Indonesian humour is a strong indicator of one's increased understanding of Indonesian language and culture.

Do you agree with this statement? Why, or why not?