A Little on the Lighter Side!—and Beyond?

Werner Liedtke

Over the years, I have concluded some of my courses' final examinations by asking the students to write, for two marks, a couplet, rhyme or pun about mathematics teaching and learning. The option of printing "The End" is also presented, but many students take the opportunity to write something. I am always amazed at their creativity. When the request has not been part of the exam, students have asked, "What, no poem?" or have written one anyway.

I would like to share a few submissions to illustrate what creative activities can result in, and if some of these result in a smile, then they were worthwhile.

Some students will object to being asked to write something but will do so in verse form, just to make sure. Here are three examples:

You son of a gun,
Thinking I'll write you a pun
About arithmetic fun.
Sorry—I've got to run!

Wish I could
Wish I might
Pass this test
And do all right.
Now it's over.
Now it's true.
'Cept this poem
I can't do.

As I don't have enough time
To make a couplet in rhyme,
I just thought I'd let you know
That I'm about ready to crow
And giving a test like this is a crime!

No doubt, many of the pieces that have appeared over the years are good enough to be put into print. At least one student anticipated this when she wrote:

I like to teach the numbers,
I like to teach the signs,
But I find that in arithmetic
Not many words do rhymes.
And let me just remind you,
If you put this in a book,
I want a cut of the profit,
Or I'll label you a crook!

There are students who anticipate the request and prepare something ahead of time. This was the case for K. Enders, a distance-education student from Calgary in a course on diagnosis and intervention. She enclosed the following last April:

Number Sense

When I was a child, you see,
Numbers made no sense to me.
It takes a teacher, you see,
to develop NUMERACY.

SUBITIZE !—think fast!—just try?
How many did I see? (Big sigh)
I could not count as they flashed by.
My brain is fried. Oh my, Oh My!

VISUALIZE, now my surprise!
Saw "50" in my mind—three guys!
Count fingers thrice, but toes just twice,
Teacher, am I getting wise??

FLEXIBLE, what does it mean?
To bend, to snap? Oh I'm so keen!
Different numbers make thirteen???
Such combinations I've not seen!

RELATE to other numbers?—NO!
My thinking is so awful slow.
Sixty-six is big I know!
But numbers bigger? Smaller?—OH!

CONNECTING still remains a pain.
It's so hard to engage my brain.
My teachers frowned with great disdain
Relate my math life?—insane!!

I ESTIMATE at sixty-nine,
I'll be doing math just fine,
As in my rocker I decline
And hear, "Well done—now, please resign!"

When I was in your class, you see,
NUMBER SENSE took shape—s-l-o-w-l-y.
Math intervention worked for me.
Thank you—
"Was blind, but now I see!!!!"

I still smile when I think about the student who wrote:

Instead of studying math,
I decided to have me a bath.
The result was—I failed the test,
But of everyone there, I smelled the best!

Then, there are comments that come straight from the affective domain:

I think adding
Is very saddening.
I think subtraction
Is not worth the attraction.
I think multiplication
Is too hard to rhyme with!

Thank God this test is over
I think I am going to die.
I did not know the answers
And I couldn't even lie.

The following is part of a poem made up by K. Koopmans, who was a student in a University of Victoria program in Cranbrook, British Columbia. It was written for a unit for her Grade 2 students:

This is the tale of two young knights,
So noble and so fine.
The first young knight was named Pat Urn,
The second knight: D. Zine

Now, two things must be stated here
To clarify this rhyme,
So please listen most carefully:
I'll state it just one time.

Now, first of all, it must be known,
How to pronounce "D. Zine"
For it does not rhyme with "nineteen":
Instead, it rhymes with "nine."

Now, secondly, no one quite knows
What "D" means in D. Zine,
But he's always called this;
It seems to suit D. fine.

The problem, though, for these two knights,
Was not with just their names,
For folks thought Pat Urn and D. Zine
Were, all in all, the same.

Both knights had flags they flew with pride
Of yellow, green and blue.
They were alike in many ways,
Yet, different in a few.

D. Zine's flag was impressive, yes,
With multicoloured hues,
And random shapes across his flag,
In yellow, green and blue.

D. Zine had stars and squares galore,
Which were spread to and fro,
While shapes that were on Pat Urn's flag
Formed patterns on each row.

Compared with Pat Urn's precise flag,
Of perfect patterned rows,
D. Zine's flag was a mess of shapes
(Pat Urn had told him so!).

And so a Wizard told the town
The answer to their plight.
There was a very simple way
To recognize each knight.

One had to look so very close
At each flag of each knight,
and if the shapes repeated, then:
"It's Pat Urn!" would be right.

But if the shapes did not repeat
In any sort of way,
"This knight must be the great D. Zine!"
Is what you'd have to say.

Thence, both the knights lived happily
Their lives were full and fine,
Because of the great Wizard—
They knew Pat Urns from D. Zines.

Whenever I read the ideas submitted by teachers and teachers-to-be, I cannot help but smile and think how lucky children are to be taught by these people.

Werner Liedtke is a professor emeritus of the University of Victoria, B.C. He delivers distance education courses through the Knowledge Network and teaches at the College of the Rockies in Cranbrook, B.C. He has presented at the University of Victoria to caretakers of young children and students, and to teachers and parents about the importance of number sense and settings.