HUMOR IN TEACHING: An Analysis of the Literature

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The use of humor in the classroom describes a various group of techniques at all levels of education. These techniques range from self-deprecating humor to the use of Jon Stewart’s satirical American Politics textbook. Instructors at all levels of education can and do use humor in the classroom but most of the literature focuses on high school and university learning with little discussion of junior high education. The use of humor in the classroom is generally accepted in the literature to have positive effects on learning.

In 1980, humor in the classroom was not a new phenomena but its links to teaching effectiveness were still unknown. Much of the literature since then has focused on attempts to determine what, if any, connection exists between the best teachers and humor. The definition of “best” teachers had to be determined first in order to research their effectiveness. In this regard, the literature mirrors the discussions surrounding teacher evaluation. If students determine the best teachers then the use of humor would seem automatically connected to the use of humor in the classroom. If superior teaching is determined by methods other than students’ evaluations then it is more difficult to discern the relationship. The debate between the association of awards to humor in the classroom is still unresolved.

Recent literature has focused on the application of humor in the classroom. Most authors accept that humor use results in the creation of a positive learning environment which is tied to better learning. The latest authors discuss techniques within specific levels of education or specific disciplines to maximize the benefits of humor’s use. Humorous word games are explained for use in a high school language arts classroom. Additionally, the proper place of humor and its relation to medical school education is explored. The study focused on medical school humor use also argues that humor is associated with gifted people so humor’s use at medical school seems natural since a majority of medical students would be considered gifted. The use of satire and “fake” material, such as Jon Stewart’s American Politics textbook, is explored as well with the determination that perhaps this is a limit of using humor. The authors of this article concluded some students were turned off from the subject because of the overwhelming cynicism associated with the satirical approach. Other students disliked being required to learn “fake” material in a college level course paid for with their tuition.

All of the recent literature accepts that humor contributes positively to learning. Authors now try to determine the limits and constraints of humor’s use. The predominant approach of authors is the answer to appropriateness of specific humor. Some authors
argue that self-deprecating humor and narrative is distracting and takes away from learning because it lowers students’ impression of their instructor. Others argue these types of humor make teachers more approachable and therefore their course material is more relatable. All authors agree that some forms of humor can be offensive and should be avoided such as targeting specific students for comments that can be perceived as ridicule. However, the debate seems to still exist how to integrate humor. Some researchers believe humor should be formulated and planned ahead of time and tied directly to the instructors’ goals for the lesson. It should not be used unless it serves a clear purpose for the course material. Others contend that humor should flow in a more natural way because it allows the instructor to relate easier to their students. All researchers still stress the need to use caution in humor; instructors are encouraged to be sensitive to their students’ backgrounds, cultures and personal situations.

There are emerging debates about the application of humor in all types of education. Most literature is focused on the high school and university level but some researchers are exploring the application of humor to the growing field of online courses. The study of this genre of courses agrees with the assumption that humor provides conditions for a positive learning environment. However, online courses require a greater deal of planning and sensitivity when it comes to adding humor to content and personal communication between the instructors and students. Personal interactions between students and instructors in online courses are by their nature less common and should be considered extremely valuable opportunities to relate to students. Therefore, authors argue that construction of emails and comments should be formulated carefully to avoid the dangers of student misinterpretation.

**Recommendations**

The following are recommendations for good practice in the use of humor in the classroom taken from research of the last forty years:

- Use humor in instruction.
- Use humor cautiously and specifically. Integrate humor into the lesson plan to avoid offensive, inappropriate humor.
- Avoid personal humor; do not single any one student out for humorous engagement.
- Humor enhances learning through creation of a positive learning environment.
- Integrate humor into all instruction at all levels (to include online courses).
- Avoid the use of satirical humor texts.
- The benefits of humor outweigh the drawbacks of its use in the classroom.

**Annotated readings:**


This article is focused on the use of humor in a particular discipline: American Politics. The authors conducted a study to determine methods of engaging youth in American
political issues. They argue that contemporary technology allows for students to gain information anywhere at any time and therefore reduces any type of routine consumption of political news. Also, students are turned off to politics because of the media’s focus on scandal and concentration on hyperbole. The study sought the effects of using satirical humor in the form of Jon Stewart’s fake text book on American Politics. The authors believed its use would enhance learning of the material but they gained no empirical evidence to support their hypothesis. They did identify drawbacks to using satirical political humor in learning: “fake” texts prevented actual learning in class and overt political satire proved a disincentive to learning because it increased cynicism in students.

Bryant, Jennings, et al., “Relationship Between College Teachers’ Use of Humor in the Classroom and Students’ Evaluations of Their Teachers” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 72, no. 4 (1980): 511-519.

The authors of this study had participating university students use tape-recordings of professors’ lectures and classes to evaluate their appeal, competence, delivery and teaching effectiveness as it related to their use of humor in the classroom. The authors found no direct linkage between teachers’ use of humor and their competence as teachers. They suggested that competent teachers may feel more confident in their teaching and use humor more because they are relaxed in the classroom. Additionally, the authors found evidence to suggest that students evaluated teachers’ use of humor differently based on teacher sex. Male instructors were evaluated more favorably on competence, delivery and overall teaching effectiveness when they used humor. Female instructors, in contrast, were evaluated negatively in these aspects. The authors argue explain this difference may be related to students holding female instructors to a higher standard of performance in the classroom and allowing male teachers to “get away” with more frivolous delivery techniques.


The author of this study sought to explore the relationship between humor and learning using a more specific framework. The article acknowledges the common themes of the literature that humor has positive psychological and physiological effects which contribute to learning. The author identifies problems with previous research that developed this general understanding of humor. He argues that previous research suffered from a limited number of participants, had weak methodologies, was primarily limited to elementary aged children or was anecdotal in nature. To address these weaknesses this study started with 117 university students that would view the same three videotaped lecture in statistics and research methods. The group was split between the no-humor control and the humor variable. To increase consistency of results the humor group viewed copies of the lectures that had humorous additions added by film editors. The results of the study confirmed previous assertions that humor has a positive effect on student enjoyment and content retention, the use of humor created a relaxed atmosphere that increased student assimilation of information. The author cautions that positive effects are related to the appropriate use of humor and that instructors should avoid highly personal, subjective or contextual humor. Instead, humor should be specific, targeted and appropriate to the subject matter.
The author starts off with the position that humor is absent in online university level courses. He also argues that popularity of online courses and pervasiveness of technology mean that more universities will move toward offering online courses. The author then discusses the benefits of humor in learning that have been found in previous studies and argues that humor is necessary for all forms of learning because it creates a nonthreatening learning environment. This article is a work of opinion and commentary based on scholarly evidence. The author’s objective for this commentary is to push for universities and professors to learn how to incorporate humor into online courses.

This study compares teachers, at junior high, high school and college levels, who use three specific dramatic styles in their teaching: humor, self-disclosure and narrative. The authors videotaped willing instructors of two groups: those who had received teaching awards and those who had not received awards. The authors acknowledge that limited sample size and failure to consider other factors such as sex, age and years of experience. Despite these weaknesses, the authors found that subject with teaching awards demonstrated and used the three behaviors more often that those without teaching awards.

The authors approach the use of humor in learning from a positive view. They assert from the beginning that humor usage helps student learning. Their article discusses the pros and cons of using humor in the classroom by addressing the benefits and drawbacks of humor in learning. The authors categorize the benefits in three groups: psychological, social and cognitive. They argue that humor has the ability to alleviate stress and anxiety in students and help students’ mental and physical health. Socially humor breaks the ice between instructors and students to allow rapport and trust to be built. They also explain that humor assists cognitively by capturing student interest and attention and facilitating comprehension of the subject matter. The authors then describe the drawbacks of humor in learning which they classify as either degrading remarks, offensive humor or excessive humor. Degradation of students through insults and humor unrelated to the course shuts down rapport and trust in the classroom which hurts learning. Offensive humor may work for some students but it will insult others and cause them to disconnect from the classroom and course material. Excessive humor can undermine the credibility of the instructor or be viewed by the student as a waste of their time. Despite the drawbacks, the authors contend the benefits derived from using humor in learning justify instructor use. They caution, however, that care should be taken to avoid negative humor behaviors.

The authors of this study mirror the literature in regards to their acceptance of a positive effect of the use of humor in learning. This work is unique in how it applies humor to language arts instruction, from the perspective of high school and junior high language arts instructors, through a series of recommended in-class activities. These techniques are classified as: “elevated vocabulary,” “poetic word play,” “church bulletins,” “Who Wants to e a Millionaire” and “Johnny Carson.” “Elevated vocabulary” has students take common English language expressions, such as “beauty is only skin deep” and change the words to mean the same thing “pulchritude possesses solely cutaneous profundity.” “Poetic wordplay” refers to the technique of using words to express humor in poetry: “my first job was working in an orange juice factory until I got canned, couldn’t concentrate.” The technique of using internet memes describing humorous word choice and grammar errors is referred to as “church bulletins” because it began with mistakes found in the leaflets. “Who Wants to be a Millionaire” and” Johnny Carson” are activities that use humorous skits from those respective shows such as Carson’s Amazing Karnak to gain the attention of students as they develop their vocabulary.


The authors argue that despite the evidence which supports the use of humor in the classroom as a positive technique, academia still contends that teachers are not intended to entertain and therefore humor should be limited. The authors are English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors who teach adult learners from various cultures and nations. They apply the discussion of humor in learning to their particular field and experience and assess that humor is extremely helpful to their success because it promotes a relaxed learning environment. The authors describe the three techniques they use to achieve this environment: learner presentations about their own cultures and countries; shifting of classroom conventions and the use of icebreakers at the beginning of class periods. Humor is integrated into all of these practices but the authors recommend caution in its use based on the various cultural sensitivities that are pervasive is ESL classrooms. They suggest knowing your learners, making it simple and short and being universal in your application of humor.


This work focuses on the differences between appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor in the classroom. The study categorizes humor into four major groups: related, unrelated, offensive and disparaging. The authors contend that the goal of humor in the classroom is to enhance learning but it is difficult because for humor to be effective it must be appropriate. Therefore instructors must understand what types and techniques of humor are appropriate and which are inappropriate. In order for humor to be effective it must help the instructor to meet a goal in the classroom. This is necessary because students are the judges of appropriateness and this judgment is subjective and dependent on multiple unpredictable factors.

This article provides insight into the use of humor in a specific field of education: medical teaching. The author finds that humor is common in medical and nursing instruction. The relationship between its use and the medical profession stems from a number of causes. The author relates the connection between humor and job stress; those with stressful jobs tend to use humor as a coping mechanism. Additionally, the author describes a connection between humor and giftedness. Therefore medical students and professors will generally use humor more than other professions and students.