

# They That Sow “Ha-Ha” Shall Reap “Aha”

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The inspiration to write this review, as well as the choice of title, came from an article by Randall L. Garner published in *College Teaching* [1]. From reading this article, I learned that something I try to incorporate into my teaching, but thought of as spontaneous and carrying little other value than preventing my students from falling asleep, may lead to being more positively rated by them at the end of the semester, moreover it may even enhance their learning. After performing a literature search, I found out that the use of humor in the college classroom has been investigated by education researchers using a variety of methodologies and operationalizations – meaning the use of a defined set of variables and operations by which the abstract concept becomes *measurable*.

Most efforts of educators are focused on seeking to become more effective teachers. In the last twenty-five years, instructional communication researchers have identified a number of teacher communication behaviors that enhance teaching effectiveness, including the use of humor in teaching. We know from personal experience that humor (*\`hyü-mər*) “something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing”, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, can be used competently or incompetently as a communication behavior.

Humor may be interjected in various places of the instructional process and can take many forms, but it should be only used appropriately. I do not know of any books on education that would attempt to provide a comprehensive prescription on the use of humor based upon results of experimental studies conducted in the classroom. The purpose of this review is to identify opportunities for using humor in the classroom, and discuss how the use of humor affects learning outcomes. As an instructor of physics and astrophysics, I am most interested in the appropriate use of humor in courses that students perceive as “difficult”.

In 1985, Charles R. Gruner [2] gave the following six suggestions to the beginning public speaker on the use of humor:

1. *Relevant humor in informative discourse will probably produce a more favorable audience reaction toward the speaker.*

“Probably” above refers to the situation when the audience has a “set” perception toward the speaker’s sense of humor. This is the case when the use of humor may become detrimental. In 1971 Mettee, Hrelec and Wilkins had Yale students rate a “professor” lecturing on videotape. Half the students were told that the otherwise competent professor was a “frustrated comedian”, while the other half were told that he was “dry and humorless”. The students who were told that the professor was a comedian rated him high if he left out a joke and rated him low if he used it, while the students told that the professor was dry rated him low if he told no joke and high if he did tell one.

2. *Humor that is self-disparaging may further enhance speaker image.*  
 “Laughing at oneself” shows a good sense of humor, a person with warm personality whom does not take oneself too seriously. Students may find it easier to relate positively to such a personality.
3. *Apt, relevant humor in a speech can enhance the interestingness of that speech; this generalization must be qualified and limited, however.*  
 If a speech is already attention-grabbing, concrete, suspenseful and enthusiastically delivered, the addition of humor may not enhance its interestingness, as a “ceiling effect” may be reached.
4. *Apt, relevant humor seems not to influence the effectiveness of persuasive speeches either negatively or positively.*  
 Excessive use of humor (or use of humor of poor taste, exaggerated silliness, or sarcasm) will produce some negative reactions from the audience.
5. *Humor may or may not make a speech more memorable.*  
 Kaplan and Pascoe, 1977, tested for immediate and delayed recall of a lecture presented with or without humor. The humorous lecture did not produce immediate recall superior to the non-humorous one, but it did show better recall over the long run.
6. *The use of satire as a persuasive device may have unpredictable results.*  
 Intelligence seems to be related to the ability to understand satire. People who understand satire tend to also be liberal, open-minded, and verbally intelligent. Since a college teacher is likely to have a general audience, not all of whom may be equipped to enjoy the bite of satire, (s)he is encouraged to use “straight” persuasion rather than satire.

The starting point of two studies conducted by Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum [3] was an earlier article published by Norton in 1977, entitled *Teacher effectiveness as a function of communication style*, in which the author provides evidence that teacher effectiveness is related to communication style. Norton’s study identifies eleven independent, and one dependent variable relating to teacher effectiveness. The independent variables defined the *communication style* of the teacher, and they were: precise, argumentative, relaxed, voice, dominant, dramatic, open, attentive, animated, friendly, and impression leaving, while the dependent variable defined the *communicator image*. Using this as a starting point, in their first study Downs et al. [3] attempted to provide normative data regarding teacher use of humor, self-disclosure, and narratives. The results of this study indicated that an average of thirteen humorous attempts were made by teachers in a fifty-minute lecture period, the attempts were often directed toward class material, and they were relevant to course content. Their second study was nearly identical to the first one, except that it involved award-winning teachers. Results indicated that teachers involved in the second study only averaged seven humorous attempts, these were also connected to course material, but only two-thirds of them were relevant to content. Comparing the results of the two studies the authors concluded that there were significant differences in the frequency of using humor between the two groups, but the purpose of its use by both was to clarify class material.

In contrast to this, a study conducted by Bergen [4] in early childhood classrooms indicated that the amount of humor used varied greatly depending on the classroom situation and teacher. Many of the participating teachers avoided using humor because it was considered disruptive in young children’s educational settings. On the contrary, researchers investigating older students’ learning conclude that the use of humor increases attention, reduces test anxiety, improves critical thinking skills, and promotes positive classroom climate. Even if many studies advocate the value of humor in the college classroom, its use may be difficult for those to whom it does not come naturally, or at all. Is there any help available for these educators? Smithson [5] points those interested in incorporating humor into their teaching, and in need of assistance, to two books on public speaking: Michael Iapocce’s *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Boardroom* (1988) and Gene Perret’s *Using Humor for Effective Business Speaking* (1989). According to the review’s author, the first book may be more practical for the college professor.

If one wants to incorporate humor into teaching, it should be interesting to find out what kind of humor, if any, do the audiences appreciate? And appreciate they do, since according to Brown, Tomlin, and Forston [6] forty nine out of one hundred thirty three college students asked to identify the one classroom variable they felt most represented their “best” professor chose “Instructor’s sense of humor and the class was enjoyable” runner up only to “Instructor’s variety of teaching methods”, which received forty eight votes. The other six available choices were only picked by a handful of students. It is not only that students enjoy being in the classroom of a humorous teacher, but they also have an increased perception of learning according to Bekelja Wanzer, and Bainbridge Frymier [7]. In their study the authors advanced and proved the following four hypotheses:

1. *There will be a significant positive correlation between student perceptions of teacher humor orientation and student learning.*
2. *There will be a significant positive correlation between student perception of teacher’s humor orientation a nonverbal immediacy (such as looking, or leaning toward someone, touching someone in a non-threatening manner, sitting near someone, smiling, and speaking in an animated way).*
3. *Teacher humor orientation will be associated with socio-communicative style such that competent-androgynous (neither using their specifically feminine, nor masculine characteristics) teachers will be perceived as having a higher humor orientation.*
4. *There will be significant positive relationship between instructor’s socio-communicative style and nonverbal immediacy.*

The results of the study confirmed these hypotheses. Humor is related to immediacy and responsiveness. A teacher with a high “humor orientation” enhances student learning beyond the effects of teacher responsiveness and nonverbal immediacy.

So, what type of humor – when used appropriately – has the potential to reduce anxiety, keep people thinking, and encourage learning? What type of humor should professors use? The results of three studies help us answer these questions. According to a more recent study, published in 2004 by Torok, McMorris, and Lin [8], students indicated, and recommended, the use in class of the following types of humor:

1. Funny stories
2. Funny comments
3. Jokes
4. Professional humor
5. Puns
6. Cartoons
7. Riddles
8. Sarcasm
9. Sexual jokes
10. Ethnic jokes
11. Aggressive/hostile jokes

Students participating in this survey considered sarcasm the only negative form of humor.

Another study, conducted by Bekelja Wanzer, Bainbridge Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, and Smith [9], also investigates what students’ views are about humor, but identifies four appropriate humor categories, and four inappropriate ones. The appropriate categories are:

1. *Related humor*  
any humor used by the professor that related to the material or enhanced learning in the classroom

2. *Humor unrelated to class material*  
any humor used by the professor that did not relate to learning or classroom enhancement
3. *Self-disparaging humor*  
jokes, stories or comments in which an instructor criticizes, pokes fun of or belittles him/herself
4. *Unintentional or unplanned humor*  
not intended to be funny, such as unintentional puns and slips of the tongue

The inappropriate types of humor, identified by students are:

1. *Offensive humor*  
any types of humor that were clearly identified as offensive in nature although not necessarily targeted at a specific person or persons
2. *Disparaging humor student target*  
any humor that is disparaging in nature and targets students as a group or individual students
3. *Disparaging humor: "other" target*  
any humor attempts that are clearly disparaging in nature, and are targeted at individuals or groups other than students
4. *Self-disparaging humor*  
type of humor involving the professor criticizing, poking fun of or belittling him/herself.  
Example: professor says, "I am such an idiot!"

Based on the results of this study, instructors should avoid using humor targeting a particular student (or group of students) and joking about a student's intelligence, personal life/interests, appearance, gender, or religion. Additionally, instructors should refrain from using sexual or vulgar types of jokes. Professors who use humor while teaching should closely examine their humor in relation to the categories identified above to assess their level of appropriateness.

Finally, but most interesting to me, some articles [10,11] talked about the use of humor in "dreaded" classes such as science, which is my field, mathematics, and technical courses. In the first article, [10], Stuart V. Hellman provides the reader with what I call the "five S-s": Stu's Seven Simple Steps for Success. (The reader interested in computer programming should also visit his Web site: Hellman's Home for Hopeless Hackers.)

Step 1: *Be yourself*

Make humor used in class smooth and like a natural part of your speech pattern. Hint: Do not laugh at your own joke!

Step 2: *Pick your spots*

Recognize that there is a time for humor and there is a time to be serious.

Step 3: *Be politically correct*

Be careful not to inadvertently hurt your students.

Step 4: *Know your audience*

Use the first meeting of a course to get to know your students and allow them to become familiar with your "unique" method of instruction.

Step 5: *Use oxymorons, alliteration and acronyms*

Oxymorons: Make a quick quip or one-liner and go on to the next topic in your lesson plan.

Alliterations: Stu's Seven Simple Steps for Success, Hellman's Home for Hopeless Hackers

Acronyms: Make up funny definitions to terminology used in your field similar to:

Microsoft: "Most Intelligent Customers Realize Our Software Only Fools Them"

Windows: "Will Install Needless Data Onto Working System"

Step 6: *Sometimes, you need to be quiet*

Let students make the joke. Don't cut off rambling students, anticipate that they will put their feet in their mouths.

Step 7: *Acknowledge other's humor*

Let the student have his or her moment in the sun.

The purpose of the second article mentioned in the previous paragraph, written by Kher, Molstad, and Donahue [11], is to identify more opportunities for the use of humor than those identified and deemed "recommended by students" by Torok, McMorris, and Lin [8]. In addition to the eleven categories listed in [8]: funny stories, funny comments, jokes, professional humor, puns, cartoons, riddles, sarcasm, sexual jokes, ethnic jokes, aggressive/hostile jokes) this article adds: cartoons, top ten lists, comic verse, and phony or bogus experiments. Indeed, the article is a treasure cove of humorous materials that anyone can adapt to their own class, such as:

1. Top ten things more fun than ... (name of your subject)
2. Top ten things you should know about your instructor
3. Top ten pet peeves of your instructor
4. Advantages of (your course name) seed implant over brain surgery (especially useful before exams)

In conclusion, contrary to the early childhood classroom, where humor is often considered disruptive [4], humor can be integrated into the college classroom in such way that it fosters a sense of openness and respect between students and the teacher. As college instructors we are powerful role models. It is important that we use appropriate humor in our classrooms avoiding its delivery through insult or sarcasm. When students feel safe, they can enjoy the learning process, and even learn more. The thoughtful use of humor by instructors can contribute to their teaching effectiveness.

## References

- [1] Garner, R. L., "Humor in Pedagogy; How 'Ha-Ha' Can Lead to 'Aha'!" *College Teaching*, Volume 54, pp. 177-179 (2006)
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- [3] Downs, V. C., Javidi, M., Nussbaum, J. F. "An Analysis of Teacher's Verbal Communication Within the College Classroom: Use of Humor, Self-disclosure, and Narratives", *Communication Education*, Volume 37, pp. 127-141 (1988)
- [4] Bergen, D. "Using Humor to Facilitate Learning" *Childhood Education*, 69, Volume 2, pp. 105-106 (1992)
- [5] Smithson, S. "Review of Humor Resources" *Communication Education*, Volume 41, pp. 452-455 (1992)
- [6] Brown, W., Tomlin, J., and Forston, S., "Best and Worst University Teachers: The Opinions of Undergraduate Students", *College Student Journal*, Volume 30, pp. 431-434 (1996)
- [7] Bekelja Wanzer, M., and Bainbridge Frymier, A., "The Relationship Between Student Perceptions of Instructor Humor and Students' Reports of Learning" *Communication Education*, Volume 48, pp. 48-62 (1999)

- [8] Torok, S. E., McMorris, R. F., and Lin, W.-C. "Is Humor an Appreciated Teaching Tool? Perceptions of Professor's Teaching Styles and Use of Humor" *College Teaching*, Volume 52, pp. 14-20 (2004)
- [9] Bekelja Wanzer, M., Bainbridge Frymier, A., Wojtaszczyk, A. M., and Smith, T., "Appropriate and Inappropriate Uses of Humor by Teachers", *Communication Education*, Volume 55, pp. 178-196 (2006)
- [10] Hellman, S. V. "Humor in the Classroom: Seven Simple Steps to Success" *College Teaching*, Volume 55, pp. 37-39 (2007)
- [11] Kher, N., Molstad, S., and Donahue, R., "Using Humor in the College Classroom to Enhance Teaching Effectiveness in 'Dread Courses' ", *College Student Journal*, Volume 33, pp. 400-406 (1999)

### **Annotated References**

- Bekelja Wanzer, Melissa, and Bainbridge Frymier, Ann, "The Relationship Between Student Perceptions of Instructor Humor and Students' Reports of Learning" *Communication Education*, Volume 48, pp. 48-62 (1999)  
This study examines the role of teacher humor orientation on students' perception of learning, as well as the interaction between teacher humor orientation and student humor orientation on learning.
- Bekelja Wanzer, Melissa, Bainbridge Frymier, Ann, Wojtaszczyk, Ann M., and Smith, Tony, "Appropriate and Inappropriate Uses of Humor by Teachers", *Communication Education*, Volume 55, pp. 178-196 (2006)  
Student participants in this study were tasked to generate examples of appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor by teachers. Based on the received responses four appropriate and four inappropriate humor categories were identified. The implications of using the different types of humor in the classroom are discussed.
- Bergen, Doris "Using Humor to Facilitate Learning" *Childhood Education*, 69, Volume 2, pp. 105-106 (1992)  
This short article investigates humor that preschool, kindergarten and first grade students express in school. It also mentions that college students enlist "good sense of humor" as a characteristic of "good" professors. It is found that humor in the classroom promotes positive learning outcomes. A teacher creating connections between humor and learning is providing students with their most enjoyable school experience.
- Brown, William, Tomlin, James, and Forston, Stephen, "Best and Worst University Teachers: The Opinions of Undergraduate Students", *College Student Journal*, Volume 30, pp. 431-434 (1996)  
One hundred thirty three junior level undergraduate students were asked to identify the variable that most influenced the choice of their "best" and "worst" instructor and also to describe these instructors in one sentence. Sense of humor and using a variety of teaching methods were perceived as most influencing undergraduate student choices of their "best" instructor. Poor course organization and limited instructional variety were most influential in the students' choice of their "worst" instructor.

- Downs, Valerie C., Javidi, “Mitch” Manooehr, Nussbaum, Jon F. “An Analysis of Teacher’s Verbal Communication Within the College Classroom: Use of Humor, Self-disclosure, and Narratives” *Communication Education*, Volume 37, pp. 127-141 (1988)  
The results of two studies are presented. The frequent use of humor, self-disclosure and narratives relevant to course content by fifty-seven college professors participating in Study One contributed at clarifying course content. Award-winning teachers participating in Study Two also used humor, self-disclosure and narrative in a relevant way, but they used it less frequently than their peers from Study One.
- Garner, Randall L. “Humor in Pedagogy; How Ha-Ha can lead to Aha!” *College Teaching*, Volume 54, pp. 177-179 (2006)  
This study assesses the impact of in-class use of curriculum-specific humor on retention and recall. Follow-up interviews with participants supported the idea that content-focused humor helped students better comprehend the material and lead to a more enjoyable class experience. Instructors using humor were more positively rated by their students since they created the impression of making an extra effort to getting the message across.
- Gruner, Charles R. “Advice to the Beginning Speaker on Using Humor – What the Research Tells Us” *Communication Education*, Volume 34, pp. 142-147 (1985)  
This summary of the results of several studies conducted by Gruner on using humor as a form of communication provides a comprehensive prescription on the use of humor in speaking by listing six specific suggestions.
- Hellman, Stuart V. “Humor in the Classroom: Seven Simple Steps to Success” *College Teaching*, Volume 55, pp. 37-39 (2007)  
This article describes uses of humor that have worked for the author in teaching a “serious” subject (computer programming). It provides the reader with tips and tricks that one may not have tried in the classroom, and it also looks at some theory behind the use of humor.
- Kher, Neelam, Molstad, Susan, and Donahue, Roberta, “Using Humor in the College Classroom to Enhance Teaching Effectiveness in ‘Dread Courses’ ”, *College Student Journal*, Volume 33, pp. 400-406 (1999)  
This article identifies opportunities for incorporating humor in the college classroom, reviews the impact of humor on learning outcomes, and suggests guidelines for the appropriate use of humor.
- Smithson, Scott “Review of Humor Resources” *Communication Education*, Volume 41, pp. 452-455 (1992)  
The effective use of humor in public speaking requires careful planning. Using the resources examined in this review may lead to an improved use of humor as a public speaking tool.
- Torok, Sarah E., McMorris, Robert F., and Lin, Wen-Chi “Is Humor an Appreciated Teaching Tool? Perceptions of Professor’s Teaching Styles and Use of Humor” *College Teaching*, Volume 52, pp. 14-20 (2004)  
This study examines the use of various types of humor during class, and identifies the types of humor that college students and faculty recommend for use. It also discusses whether students felt that their learning experience improved when teachers used humor, therefore describing the influence of incorporating humor on perceived professor competence and effectiveness.