

Humor in Teaching

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As recently as the 1990s, structured use of humor in...classrooms was elusive at best, and flat out dissuaded by administrators at worst (Lovorn, 2008). And, while the use of humor to facilitate learning is not a new concept, it is seeing an emergence today as more teachers and educators look for methods to better communicate and help students learn. Humor can be represented as jokes, puns, riddles, sarcasm, physical antics, nonverbal behaviors, cartoons, and one-liners (Wanzer et al., 2006). Additionally, when employed as a conversation starter, tension-breaker or therapeutic intervention, laughter is a highly effective way to stimulate communication (Lovorn, 2008). Other factors that influence the effectiveness of humor in the classroom include humor appropriate for the audience, targeted to the topic, and placed in the context of the learning experience (Garner, 2005). However, even those who champion using humor in the classroom admit that there are dangers to the student-educator roles if the humor is allowed to get out of hand or is misconstrued by students. There is a fine line between the competent use of humor in the classroom and inappropriate humor in the classroom.

For those who desire a more relaxed atmosphere in their classrooms, the use of humor as a pedagogical tool has been shown to reduce classroom anxiety, create a more positive atmosphere, as well as facilitate the learning process (Berk, 1996, 1998; Garner, 2003; Pollio & Humphreys, 1996). Research also supports the idea that humor facilitates retention of novel information, increases learning speed, improves problem solving, relieves stress, reduces text anxiety, and increases perceptions of teacher credibility (Torok, et. al., 2004). Additionally, Joseph Lowman (1994) found that effective college teachers were often described by their students as „enthusiastic“ and those who use humor in their instruction were rated more highly. And Tom Tatum, a high school English teacher, claims that using [humor] enhances lesson plans, compels students to pay closer attention, and gives many students a chance to display creative thinking skills (Tatum, 1999).

In 2006, Melissa Wanzer placed appropriate teacher humor into four different categories labeled: “related humor,” “humor unrelated to course material,” self-disparaging humor,” and “unintentional humor” (Wanzer, et al., 2006, 184). Another way to view these four categories is by labeling them as “high-risk humor,” “low-risk humor,” “offensive humor,” and “self-effacing humor” (Berk, 2003).

Ronald Berk, who advocates using humor as a systematic teaching or assessment tools, suggests using what he describes as a humor trifecta, in which all three elements are required for maximum winnings. The trifecta consists of 1) expected – serious set-up with commonly understood situation or content; 2) expected – build-up of tension; and 3) unexpected twist – the punchline (Berk, 2002). There *has* to be an element of surprise, which is often difficult to incorporate in these days of political correctness, when speakers are so fearful of making a mistake that they run every witticism through internal censors, causing spontaneity to disappear (Nilson, 1994). Regardless of the material

taught or the method of presentation, Berk stresses confidence in one's material and the ability to deliver.

Some examples of competent humor include satire, puns, hyperbole, absurdity, and irony; taken too far, they can be a weapon, but used well, can connect students' world to the classroom material, and give them a vehicle for understanding their paradoxical lives (Davis, 1999). For instructors so inclined, pedagogical use of humor in the classroom, as with any type of educational approach, can enhance learning and retention, but it must have a high degree of resonance for the listener. Students must be able to recognize the meaning that is being conveyed and its relevance to the issue at hand (Garner, 2005). Alleen Nilson, Professor of English at Arizona State University, and instrumental in founding the International Society for Humor Studies, suggests, when using humorous incidents or jokes, that the instructor keep four characteristics in mind: 1) the subject, 2) the tone, 3) the intent, and 4) the situation, including the teller and the audience (Nilson, 1994).

This is not to say that all educators who employ humor in the classroom will necessarily be viewed as good or even adequate instructors. In fact, several detractors of this pedagogy argue that there is a fine line between joking and disrupting a proper classroom tone essential if any learning is to take place (Sudol, 1981). As David Sudol, a high school teacher, says, if used unnecessarily or allowed to get out of hand, "the classroom becomes a playroom, a circus, or – at worst – a zoo" (26). Also, students are more likely to view teacher humor as inappropriate when it is perceived as offensive and when it demeans students, either as a group or individually (Frymier, et. al., 2008).

Inappropriate humor behavior is placed into four different categories: "disparaging humor: targeting students," "disparaging humor: targeting others," "offensive humor," and "self-disparaging humor" (Wanzer, et al., 2006, 185). Wanzer also specifies that the group labeled "others" clearly refers to nonstudent populations, such as with general stereotypes (Wanzer, et. al., 2006). Tatum cautions against allowing humorous word play and creativity to get out of hand, which can sometimes lead to socially unacceptable, racially or ethnically charged overtones (Tatum, 1999). Another caution is that allowing students to become too sarcastic, or too absurd, detracts from the course-related material and meaning of the class (Sudol, 1981).

And, rules about appropriate humor are increasingly more difficult to enforce considering that virtually all forms of contemporary entertainment incorporate vitriolic and sadistic attempts at humor (Lovorn, 2008). Michael Lovorn, an Assistant Professor at California State University, argues that there are inopportune situations when humor is inappropriate. Those situations include humor that is hurtful or demeaning, cynical, sarcastic or sardonic in nature, type of humor that reinforces stereotypes, biases or sexual or cultural misconceptions, and humor directed at someone who does not wish to participate (Lovorn, 2008).

A measure for determining when humor needs to stay out of the learning environment is when it is deemed offensive, based on an individual, subjective interpretation. To

minimize the chance of offending a student or students, an instructor needs to either share or understand the values and principles of his/her students (Berk, 2002). Wanzer, et. al., conducted a study which listed types of disparaging humor students found inappropriate. Groups of students disparaged based on their intelligence, gender or appearance. Individual students singled out by an instructor and disparaged on the basis of their intelligence, personal opinions, appearance, gender, or religion (Wanzer, et. al., 2006).

When students deem a comment or joke as insensitive or offensive, they react in a variety of ways which hinder the learning process and relaxed atmosphere. Reactions can include tightening up, withdrawal, resentment, anger, tension, anxiety, and turning off or tuning out (Berk, 2002). Because the use of inappropriate or disparaging humor often attacks students' self concept, we might describe it as a form of verbal aggression (Wanzer, et. al., 2006). Yet, incidents where humor offends someone need to be discussed because that's where learning will occur and where tensions will be released (Nilson, 1994).

A final note on the use of humor in the classroom: Humor can be used as a systematic teaching or assessment tool in your classroom and course Web site. It can shock students to attention and bring dead, boring course content to life. Since some students have the attention span of goat cheese, we need to find creative online and offline techniques to hook them, engage their emotions, and focus their minds and eyeballs on learning (Berk, 2002).

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for competent use of humor in the classroom (Wanzer, et. al., 2006):

- Humor related to material (tactic not specific).
- Humor related to course material using different types of media or external props to enhance learning.
- Jokes related to course material.
- Humorous examples to illustrate course concepts.
- Humorous stories to illustrate course concepts or reinforce learning.
- Critical/cynical about course material in an effort to be humorous.
- Humor attempts related to course material and targeting stereotypical college behaviors.
- Humor attempts related to the material and, at the same time directed towards students.
- Humor attempts related to class material that involve some type of animated performance.
- Humor attempts related to course material that involve student role play or activities.
- Humor attempts related to course material that involve creative language or word play.

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Annotated Readings:

- Berk, R. A. (1996). "Student ratings of ten strategies for using humor in college teaching." *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 71-92.

I think this source would have been extremely useful to my research efforts, as many of my references – Garner, Berk 2003, Lovorn, Wanzer, et. al., etc. – cited this article, but I could not find it.

Bradford, A. L. (1964). "The Place of Humor in Teaching." *Peabody Journal of Education, Vol. 42, No. 2*, 67-70.

This article argues that humor has a high place in teaching because teaching must have realism. "Reality is often incongruous, situationally absurd. It is never logical for long" (68). There are broad, sweeping generalizations, but Bradford argues that without humor, the mind suffers, and a humorless individual, lacking in personality, is crippled. Therefore, this education filled with humor allows for a more well-rounded individual, capable of handling life and civilization with hope and a sense of humor for the ever-changing realities.

Frymier, A. B., & Houser, M. L. (2000). "The teacher-student relationship as an interpersonal relationship." *Communication Education, Vol. 49, No. 3*, 207-219.

While this article does not really discuss humor in the relationship between teachers and students, it does examine communication skills in the teacher-student relationship. Findings include: students reported referential skill, ego support, and conflict management as being most important to effective teaching; and that referential skill, ego support, and immediacy have a strong relationship with student learning and motivation. The implied finding is that a more relaxed relationship leads to better conflict management and more effective teaching, and is then followed by the assumption that one of the methods of achieving this relationship is through appropriate humor.

Frymier, A. B. & Weser, B. (2001). "The role of student predispositions on student expectations for instructor communication behavior." *Communication Education, Vol. 50, No. 4*, 314-326.

This article looks at three students and the relationship of their expectations for instructor communication behavior to their class dispositions. Examines students' communication apprehension, grade and learning orientation, and humor orientation in relation to students' expectations for teachers' use of verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors, clarity behaviors, and humor behaviors. Finds that student learning/grade orientation was related to expectations for instructor communication behavior.

Garner, R. (2006). "Humor in pedagogy: How ha-ha can lead to aha!" *College Teaching, Vol. 54, No. 1*, 177-180.

This article references several studies examining the pedagogical implications and cautions concerning the use of humor in teaching. It lists many positive physiological and psychological effects. One of the arguments Garner promotes is that educators who use humor in their instruction are more positively rated by their peers and their students, while pointing out further studies which have suggested that humor may enhance learning. While the studies Garner cites are interesting, they are purely anecdotal, and needs further credible studies in order to be used as concrete evidence for the use of humor in the classroom. Finally, this article discusses the appropriate use of humor in a classroom setting and cautions against tendentious humor.

Glasgow, N. A. & Hicks, C. D. (2002). *What Successful Teachers Do: 91 Research-based Classroom Strategies for New and Veteran Teachers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2002.

While the majority of this book is about techniques for teaching, interacting with students, parents, and colleagues, “Chapter 1: Interacting and Collaborating with Students” does present various ways to alleviate student test anxiety and suggests using humor to improve student interactions. Glasgow and Hicks combine theory, research, and employable suggests. The chapters in the book cover curriculum and pedagogy, discipline and classroom management, interacting and collaborating with students, managing classroom organization and discipline, lesson plans and instructional delivery, using student assessment and feedback to improve instructional effectiveness, working with special needs students, embracing and celebrating diversity, integrating technology into the classroom, enhancing teacher self-assessment and reflection, developing a professional identity, time management and organization.

Godfrey, W. P. (1953). “The Teacher as Humorist.” *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 24, No. 5, 227-229.

Godfrey argues that humor is a valuable adjunct to the many skills involved in teaching, which he likens to an art. He discusses the tension created by a mentality of “transmitting of knowledge from an older to a younger robot” (227), and the presumed superiority instructors tend to exude in the classroom. While this article is very much out of date, it adds to the history of the debate about the use of history in the classroom, and allows the reader to understand that there is a difference between comedy and humor/wit.

Gurtler, L. (2002). “Humor in Educational Contexts.” Chicago: Paper presented at the 110th Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association. ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED470407, 2002.

This article mentions the use of humor in the classroom, but only as a lead-up to its main focus – the enhancement of social climate through humor. Gurtler explores personal mental models associated with humor, and presents a framework of humors models. The elements of this framework are “action theory, humanistic psychology, and Vipassana mediation technique to give guidance in the development of the preconditions of humor.” After Gurtler begins expounded on his psychological theory, I found the article to not have much relevance to the discussion of humor in the classroom.

Jennings, B. & Zillman, D. (1989). “Using Humor to Promote Learning in the Classroom.” *Journal of Children in Contemporary Society*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 49-78.

This article was not used in the essay, but it does back up Wanzer, et. al., assertions that there are certain normative patterns of teachers’ humor which can be employed competently and to further promote discourse and learning in the classroom. Questions such as “Should teachers avoid certain types of humor?” and “Does teaching with humor

enhance students' attention?" are discussed, and guidelines for using humor in the classroom are offered.

Kher, N., Molstad, S., & Donahue, R. (1999). "Using humor in the college classroom to enhance teaching effectiveness in "dread courses." *College Student Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 400-406.

This article identifies opportunities for humor in the classroom, discusses how humor affects learning outcomes, and presents guidelines for the appropriate use of humor, particularly in the "dread courses." The article identifies "dread courses" as ones that "students sometimes avoid due to a lack of self-confidence, perceived difficulty of the material, or a previous negative experience in a content area such as mathematics" (1). Presents ideas on incorporating humor into the classroom, linking humor and course learning outcomes, and guidelines for incorporating humor into the classroom.

Lowman, J. (1994). "Professors as performers and motivators." *College Teaching*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 137-141.

This article argues that intellectual excitement and interpersonal rapport are important qualities that influence teaching effectiveness. It proposes a model of effective college teaching based on these qualities that utilizes a 39-item checklist evaluation form. The form was tested with students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and appears to show promising validity.

Martin, R. A. (2007). *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007.

Martin presents research on humor in psychology, including the cognitive (What makes something funny?), developmental (when do we develop a sense of humor?), and social (how is humor used in social interactions?). The article presents a summary of information researchers might wish to know about research into the psychology of humor. The material is scholarly, but any undergraduate or graduate level student is able to read and understand the presentation of the material.

Pollio, H. & Humphreys, W. (1996). "What award-winning lecturers say about their teaching: It's all about connection." *College Teaching*, 44, 101-106.

I think this source would have been extremely useful to my research efforts, as many of my references – Garner, Berk 2003, Kher, et. al., Wanzer, et. al., etc. – cited this article, but I could not find it.

Wanzer, M. B. (2002). "Use of humor in the classroom: The good, the bad, and the not-so-funny things that teachers say and do." In J. L. Chesebro & McCroskey (Eds.), *Communication for Teachers* (pp. 116-125). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

The book synthesizes research on teacher communication, focusing on applying the theories to practical classroom situations and student-teacher interactions. It is divided into three sections, with this article falling into the second section. Wanzer focuses on teaching behavior, such as nonverbal immediacy and use of humor, in order to better communicate with students from other cultures or in a distance learning setting.