Humor in the Classroom: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

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What the Research Says

- Scholars of Instructional Communication have devoted substantial research answering the question:
  - How does humor influence the education process?
- Most of the research has focused on the “positive” aspects which means that there are “negative” aspects.

Negative Aspects of Humor in the Classroom

- When humor is done improperly or too frequently, it can detract from learning. It can simply confuse the students which may reduce the credibility of the instructor.
- Inappropriate humor offends and distances students from the instructor. Never use humor that targets sex, race, gender, political views or that criticizes a student for ignorance, poor performance or personal beliefs. Never.
- Sarcasm is like poison in the classroom

Positive Aspects of Humor in the Classroom

1. Humor during instruction can help break down barriers to communication between professor and student. (Deiter, 2000)
2. When humor reinforces content it can help students better retain subject matter (Deiter, 2000)
3. Humor can improve student performance by reducing anxiety, boosting participation and increasing students motivation to focus on the material. (Stambor, 2006)
4. Humor has the potential to diffuse tense situations as well as avoid or reduce anxiety in classroom interactions. (Klein A., Moriarty C., 2017)
5. Humor can be beneficial if it is tied to the lesson’s material, properly timed and ethically sound. Good humor signals that the educator is approachable, personal and willing to accept intellectual creativity. (Pinheiro, 2016)

Physiological Benefits Derived from Humor and Laughter in the Classroom (Ocon, 2015)

Humor and laughter in the classroom:
1. Relaxes muscles and reduces chronic pain.
2. Stimulates circulation.
3. Improves respiration.
4. Exercises the lungs and chest muscles.
5. Increases the production of (hormone) endorphins.
6. Boost the immune system.
7. Stimulates the cardiovascular system.
8. Lowers the pulse rate and blood pressure.
### Major Benefits of Using Humor in the Classroom

- Breaks down communication barriers between professor and students.
- Makes students more relaxed by reducing anxiety.
- Encourages students to listen.
- Indicates that the teacher is human and can share experiences with the class.
- Makes students less intimidated and less inhibited to ask questions or make comments.
- Promotes student creativity by encouraging them to “take chances, look at things in an offbeat way…”
- Builds group or class cohesion. Results in higher student evaluations.

### Major Benefits of Using Humor in the Classroom

- Creates a more positive, fun, interesting environment that promotes class attendance and student performance.
- Improves students’ attitudes toward the subject and the instructor.
- Makes teaching more fun and enjoyable for the instructor.
- Increases comprehension and cognitive retention, since students have less stress and anxiety.
- Has a positive affect on the level of student attention and interest: “it is physically impossible to laugh and snore at the same time.”
- Creates a positive climate for learning and enjoyment. Brings a sense of pleasure and appreciation.

### Balance

- Balance in the classroom is critical for those wanting to use humor.
- For humor to be most effective in an academic setting, it must be specific, targeted and appropriate to the subject matter. (Garner, 2006)
- Instructors need to focus on learning FIRST and have humor that will help meet that goal.
- “Students don’t necessarily want Jerry Seinfeld as their instructor.” (Pinheiro, 2016)

### Humor Orientation

- Some people have a predisposition to be funny, called humor orientation. (S. Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield, 1991)
- Humor orientation is about the ability to produce humorous messages, not the ability to appreciate humor.
- “…the teaching style of the instructor should be consistent with his or her individual humor orientation.” Wanzer & Frymier, 1999
- Not everyone is funny. “…there are few things worse than an unfunny person trying to be humorous.” Ziv 1988
What does an unfunny faculty do?

- Have someone else who is funny participate!!
- Cartoons
- Video
- Quotes
- Stories
- Can you become funny?

Humor Theories - Definition

- **Incongruity theory** states that a surprise or contradiction is essential for humor. (Banas, 2011)
- **Superiority theory** argues that laughter arises out of the sense of superiority experienced from disparagement of others. (Banas, 2011)
- **Arousal theory** conceptualizes humor as a complex interaction between emotion and cognition. Humor itself is a pleasurable emotional experience called mirth. (Banas, 2011)
- Anything that is perceived to be funny, comical or amusing. Perception is the key. It's only funny if our students say so. (Deiter, 2000)
  - "...the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life and the artistic expression thereof." (Heck 1998)

Application...

The next two slides are a table (Banas, 2011) of humor types, a description of each, representative research and it's appropriateness for the classroom.

From this table I will share things I have done in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humor type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Representative Work</th>
<th>Appropriateness for the Classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive / Affiliative humor</td>
<td>Amusing others, building solidarity, achieving balance</td>
<td>Hay (2000); Martin et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological / Social Humor</td>
<td>Establish boundaries and create status differences</td>
<td>Hay (2000); Martin et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power-based humor</td>
<td>Stories, jokes, or other humorous content related to class material</td>
<td>Hay (2000); Martin et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jokes / Riddles</td>
<td>Stories, jokes, or other humorous content related to class material</td>
<td>Hay (2000); Martin et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Context-dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-disparaging humor</td>
<td>Stories, jokes, or other humorous content related to class material</td>
<td>Hay (2000); Martin et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Context-dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unplanned humor</td>
<td>Stories, jokes, or other humorous content related to class material</td>
<td>Hay (2000); Martin et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Context-dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joke or Riddle</td>
<td>Stories, jokes, or other humorous content related to class material</td>
<td>Hay (2000); Martin et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Context-dependent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Blood Bank – IgM description…

1. Cold reacting
2. Good complement activator
3. **Pentamer**
4. ABO, Li, Lewis, MN, & P

Voice caricature…

Blood Bank Trauma: Who wants to hit the Professor with your car after last week's exam?

Blood Bank: Component Prep, Cryoprecipitate

Renal Disease: Kidney stones – signs, symptoms, etc.

Renal Disease – Protein in the urine…
Humor related to class material

I teach pieces parts of Clinical Chemistry – most blood bankers are not chemists so this was and is difficult for me so when I am losing them I get creative:

**Humor related to class material**

Stories, jokes, or other humorous content related to class material

I teach pieces parts of Clinical Chemistry – most blood bankers are not chemists so this was and is difficult for me so when I am losing them I get creative:

**Furfural**

**Bodansky**

**Wroblewski**

What are these?

STAT lab test – simulated lab at WSU.

Nonverbal humor

Using gestures, funny facial expressions, vocal tones, etc. for humorous intent

I would like to introduce you to my youngest son, Jacob Daniel Zundel.

The red arrow indicates the red blood cell transfusion line.
Research Reminders

• “It is essential that the humor used be directly related to the class content.” Alicja Rieger, 2012

• “Comedy must complement – and not distract from – course material.” Berk, 2002

• “If the goal of instructional humor is to increase learning and retention of course material… the instructional humor should illustrate a concept…” Ziv, 1988

References:


2. Ron Deiter, The use of humor as a teaching tool in the college classroom, NACTA Journal, June 2000


4. Klein A., Moriarty C., Faculty Focus – Higher Ed Teaching & Learning, You’re funnier than you think: Using humor in the classroom, 2017

5. Ralph Ocon, Using humor to create a positive learning environment, American Society for Engineering Education, 2015

6. Pinheiro C., Laughing your way through higher education: the pros and cons of using humor in the college classroom, 2016