Humor: the Underused Pedagogical Weapon

by Brian Richardson

ETEC 648C • Summer, 2009

Humor is a classroom tool that can be effective at improving student learning outcomes by relieving student anxiety, increasing student engagement, improving the classroom environment, and offering an additional approach to teaching a topic. While it is important to use humor appropriately in all classes, it is more difficult to do this in distance learning classes, and thus it is important for teachers to understand how humor should and should not be used in distance learning classes.
What Humor Can Do ...

Humor appropriately used has the potential to humanize, illustrate, defuse, encourage, reduce anxiety, and keep people thinking.

Humor has been said to facilitate the retention of novel information, increase learning speed, improve problem solving, relieve stress, reduce test anxiety, and increase perceptions of teacher credibility.

- Sarah Torok
What Students Thought – as reported in one study
(source: Torok, Is Humor an Appreciated Teaching Tool?)

- The four most popular types of humor are: funny stories, funny comments, jokes, and professional or course related humor.
- Sarcasm was fifth, but may be too negative to use in class
- Students tend to not like jokes on their exams (though the research is mixed on this)
- Students are more likely to respond positively to humor from male teachers
Inappropriate humor (according to students) includes:

- disparaging humor targeting students (their intelligence, appearance, personal life, opinions, ethnicity, mistakes made in class), disparaging humor targeting others, self-disparaging humor, and offensive humor.

Appropriate humor includes:

- jokes, teasing students, commentary on current events and political topics, self-disparaging humor, creative language use, and unintentional humor

Note: this topic is related to jokes in the workplace. See [http://www.workrelationships.com/site/quiz/](http://www.workrelationships.com/site/quiz/)
Some Differences between Face to Face and DE courses

- Face-to-face classrooms allow for quicker improvisation – even a chat room can take too more time.

- Face-to-face classrooms allow faster and more extensive feedback on the effectiveness and appropriateness of humor.

- In DE courses, students are more likely to publicly make offensive jokes, and their behavior must be monitored more.

- It takes more energy to be funny online because you ought to reread your attempts at humor to make sure they work.

- It is easier in face-to-face classes to pitch the joke - the pregnant pause, pacing, facial expressions, etc., although in DE courses you can edit the file for greater impact.
Recommendations

- Ensure that the humor is not disparaging.
- Have humorous material ready before the class begins – collect jokes, sounds, photographs, cartoons, websites, videos, etc. DE classes can use multiple formats.
- Humor that is related to the course is more effective than random humor, especially if it is integrated into assignments.
- Make sure that the humor is part of the general course netiquette, and follow your own rules.
More Recommendations

- If you’re worried about it, try to test your humor out on a small group of friends.
- If it’s a prepared joke, try to offer it as both text and recorded audio – if you’re teaching online you need to get use to hearing your own recorded voice.
- If possible, create webpages that explain the humor - but don’t automatically give the explanation – just make it an option.
More Recommendations

(source: Girdlefanny, Using Humor in the Classroom)

- Create an environment that allows humor – such as a virtual bulletin board for cartoons.
- Incorporate strange resources – April 15th is rubber eraser day, May the 4th is Star Wars day ....
- Add an element of outrageousness to your assignments – have students explain a concept as if they were Elvis or Dumbledore.
- Find your inner comedian and know what comic styles work for you.
Where to Find Humor

- The internet: Joke sites, YouTube, The Onion, The Daily Show.
- Ask your students for relevant jokes - and add them to your collection.
- Books – especially if you want humor in a specific genre such as jokes about Hawaii.
- Make stuff up yourself – especially for jokes connected to your course, your profession or current events.
Steps to Teaching an Old Dog a New Trick

Choose a Trick to Teach Your Dog

Sit?
- Catch a Frisbee?
- Fetch?
- Heel?
- Play Dead?

Roll Over?

Did you succeed?
- Yes
- No

Are you sure?
- Yes
- No

Try Again

You must be crazy
Standards

I was hoping to locate some “comedy in education standards” but did not find any.

Instead, the appropriate standards here would be those that speak to increasing student engagement, such as the NETS standard 1, which is “Facilitate and Inspire Student Learning and Creativity”, especially insofar as there is an evident connection between humor and creativity. The discussion of appropriate and inappropriate humor would also connect to promoting digital citizenship and responsibility (standard 4).
References


Discusses the use of humor in a Statistics class – one of the “dreaded” classes on campus. Results suggest that humor has a positive impact on student enjoyment and content retention.


A short how-to article for using classroom humor. Suggestions include creating a humorous bulletin board in the room and incorporating some outrageous elements in assignments.

A general advocacy article on the positive impact of humor on both student attitudes and the learning environment, emphasizing the need to use humor in online classes. Humor is one of the major traits of most effective teachers, and so it ought to be part of an effective online teaching strategy.


Compares a humor-enhanced online section of a psychology class with an otherwise identical regular section. The humor-enhanced section used the social tools more frequently and students in that section encouraged the future use of humor more than those in the regular section. Human-enhancement did not, however, seem to increase interest in online courses or in courses in psychology.

Study of student perception of their professors’ teaching, with a detailed analysis of how students reacted to different teachers and different kinds of humor. The dangers of using sarcasm (which tends to be too negative) were also discussed.


Study of college students in two classes who were shown videotapes of their classes and asked to list appropriate and inappropriate instances of humor. Results were coded into the different categories and the relative appropriateness of different types of humor were discussed.
Thank You