CHAPTER

10

Use of Humor in the Classroom

The Good, the Bad, and the Not-So-Funny Things That Teachers Say and Do

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After turning in a less than stellar first year in college, my father and I had a heated conversation one summer evening about my grades. He asked me why my grades were so poor and I told him that, among other things, my attendance was not always perfect. Before he could ask why I was having problems attending class regularly, I quickly explained that many of my professors were boring and did not have a sense of humor. My father quickly retorted, “professors are not supposed to be funny” and something else about my ability to generate excuses for my irresponsible behavior. At the time of this conversation I remember thinking that my father was probably correct. Later in my college career I encountered several professors who used humor effectively and, as a result I enjoyed their classes, learned more, and my attendance improved dramatically! While there are many other reasons for my significant improvement in class attendance (e.g., maturity, improved study skills) and grades (e.g., potential loss of funding from parents), I do feel that if students view professors as boring they may be more likely to skip their classes. In my experiences as both a student and teacher, use of humor is one way to stimulate interest in subject matter.

Humor is one instructional tool that teachers can use in the classroom to increase their effectiveness. This chapter provides a fairly detailed overview of research on humor in the classroom as well as practical suggestions for teachers who want to use humor more effectively. There are many benefits associated with use of humor in the classroom, however, teachers need to first understand why and how humor works as an instructional tool.
Positive Outcomes of Teacher Humor Use

When teachers use humor effectively in the classroom it can result in a number of benefits for teachers and students alike. For example, when teachers use humor they may receive more positive student evaluations (Bryant, Crane, Cominsky, & Zillmann, 1980) and find that students are more willing to participate in their classes. Additionally, when students take courses from teachers who use humor they may become more motivated to do well in the class (Gorham & Christophel, 1992). While there are a number of benefits that teachers derive from using humor in the classroom, the most significant reason to study teacher humor is to better understand its relationship to student learning. A number of studies have identified a positive relationship between teachers’ use of humor and student learning.

Explanations for the Humor–Learning Relationship

Why does teachers’ use of humor increase student learning? One theoretical explanation for the humor-learning relationship is based on the attention-gaining and holding power of humor (Ziv, 1979). The theory holds that, similar to teacher immediacy (Kelly & Gorham, 1988), humor is arousing, which is related to gaining and keeping students’ attention, which is related to memory, which in turn is related to learning outcomes (see Chapter 2 for a review of this process). The attention-gaining model advanced initially by Ziv (1979) has been the main theory used to explain the humor-learning relationship in the classroom (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Ziegler, 1998).

Teacher use of humor may also serve as a powerful means of gaining liking and establishing a rapport with students. If teachers use humor in the classroom they are often doing so to reduce tension, to facilitate self-disclosure, to relieve embarrassment, to save face, to disarm others, to alleviate boredom, to gain favor through self-enhancement, to convey good will, or to accomplish some other prosocial goal (Gorham & Christophel, 1990, p. 58). Teachers may be using humor primarily as a means of gaining liking and a residual effect may be increased student learning. More specifically, if students like humorous professors more they may attend class more frequently, pay attention during class, and work harder to learn the subject matter. It is a well-known fact that we are more likely to comply with requests that are made by those individuals we like (Cialdini, 1993). In sum, if students like the teacher they will be more willing to comply with a wide range of teacher requests which ultimately can result in greater learning outcomes.

Other professions may use humor as a means of generating positive affect. Primary care physicians who used humor with their patients were less likely to have malpractice suits brought up against them (Levinson, Roter, Mullooly, Dull, & Frankel, 1997). Managers who use humor are liked more and perceived as more effective by their employees (Rizzo, Wanzer, & Booth-Butterfield, 1999). Doctors,
managers, and teachers may all utilize humor as a means of increasing liking. The benefits of humor clearly extend beyond the classroom context.

Explanations for Mixed Support of the Humor–Learning Relationship

Does a teacher’s use of humor always promote learning in the classroom? The answer to this question is not an unequivocal yes. Some humor researchers may be reluctant to recommend humor as an instructional tool because of mixed study results. One problem with the humor–learning line of inquiry may be that other teacher attributes such as immediacy or socio-communicative style interact with humor to facilitate learning. That is, humor does not work alone to facilitate learning but instead works in tandem with other teacher communication traits.

Another explanation for the mixed study results may be problems with the ways that researchers have tested the humor–learning relationship. According to Ziv (1988), who summarized some of the research investigating humor and learning, 11 studies found a positive direct or indirect relationship between humor and learning while 7 studies failed to identify any significant relationship. There may be several reasons why early studies did not find a positive relationship between humor and learning. One potential explanation for the failure to show support for the humor learning effect was the length of the early studies (Ziv, 1988). In several of these studies exposure to humorous materials may have been too short for information to be retained (e.g., ten-minute exposure to stimuli may have been too short to impact retention). Additionally, participants may not have perceived the humorous stimuli as funny thus negating the ability to be aroused into an attentive state. Finally, many of the earlier studies were conducted in artificial experimental settings that did not resemble true classroom situations (Ziv, 1988).

Other researchers have identified various problems with the experimental procedures used to test the humor–learning relationship. For example, Gorham and Christophel (1990) noted that in many of the early studies testing the relationship between humor and learning, similar research procedures were utilized. Very often participants were tested for recall following lectures in which humor was introduced in the experimental condition and omitted in the control. It is somewhat difficult to generalize conclusions across many of the humor studies because different types of humor (cartoons versus jokes) and placement of humor (humor placed at key points in the presentation versus random placement) could elicit varied rates of retention. Another possible explanation for the inconsistent findings may be the different types of channels used to send the humorous messages. Some researchers delivered humor through use of audiotapes while others used lectures or video clips. It is difficult to compare these study results when the researcher is using different types of humor, placement of humor, and channels to communicate humor. In sum, differences in study results may be a function of study design as well as the ways in which humor was operationalized.
Teacher Humor Orientation
and Student Learning

A more recent trend in studying the relationship between humor and learning has been to examine how teachers who differ in humor orientation may impact learning (see for example, Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). What is humor orientation (HO)? Humor orientation is a communication based personality trait measured by the HO scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991), which assesses an individual’s predisposition to use humor frequently and in a number of different situations as well as their self-perceived effectiveness in producing humorous communication. Individuals scoring high on the HO scale are perceived as funnier and more socially attractive than individuals scoring low on the HO scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995, 1996). Also, students reported learning more from professors perceived as high in HO. Student perceptions of teacher HO was positively associated with their affective and cognitive learning. When comparing the best match in the classroom between teachers and students in regards to HO researchers concluded that the high HO students learned the most from high HO instructors. Not surprisingly, the least amount of learning occurred when a low HO instructor taught a high HO student.

Student perceptions of teacher HO are also related to perceptions of instructor immediacy. Teacher immediacy, also discussed in Chapter 6, refers to a teacher’s use of verbal and nonverbal behaviors to facilitate perceptions of physical and psychological closeness. When students view their professors as using humor frequently and effectively, they also view them as more immediate. This finding is not surprising because many of the same behaviors used to be funny (e.g., smiling, gestures, changing our voice, and so on) are the exact ones that we use to be immediate. Finally, while HO is related to learning it may not be as powerful as immediacy in explaining differences in student learning. If teachers cannot use humor effectively, they can still increase learning outcomes in the classroom through verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors. This conclusion will be discussed further in the remaining sections of the chapter.

What if you are not a high HO and humor use does not come naturally to you? What if you do not know about the types of humor to use (and avoid) in the classroom? Several researchers have examined the types of humor that teachers use in the classroom and identified those behaviors deemed the most and least appropriate by students.

Types of Humor Used by Teachers:
The Good and the Bad

Bryant, Crane, Cominsky, and Zillmann (1980) had undergraduate students tape record their instructors’ lectures and then analyze the content of the tapes for humorous incidents. Based on this research, six different categories of humorous
teacher behavior were identified: jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments, and an "other" category. The incidents were further analyzed to determine whether the humor was spontaneous or prepared, was sexual, hostile, or nonsensical, what characters were involved (teacher, student, other), was self-disparaging, or student-disparaging, and whether the humor distracted from the content or contributed to it. Interestingly, sex differences were found with male teachers being perceived as more free to use humor than female teachers. The results of this study imply that the type of humor was not as important as was the sex of the person using it. This study was the first to identify the types of humor that teachers used in the classroom.

Subsequent research on types of humor in the classroom attempted to identify an exhaustive and representative classification scheme of humorous teacher behaviors. Gorham and Christophel (1990) recognized humor as a high-inference variable which included a mix of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. They researched the relationship between student perceptions of teacher immediacy in relationship to humor use. First they had undergraduates complete immediacy and learning scales on instructors. Next, they asked students to record and observe their instructors' use of humor while teaching over five different class sessions. The student observations of teacher humor were content analyzed and thirteen different categories of humor were identified. Some examples of the humor categories included: brief tendentious comment directed at an individual student, the class as a whole, or the department or university, personal anecdote related to the subject matter, personal anecdote that is not related to the subject matter, jokes, and physical or vocal comedy.

The Gorham and Christophel (1990) study examined correlations between one item of the verbal immediacy scale, "uses humor in class," and the number of humorous incidents reported by students. The researchers noted that the total number of humorous incidents was positively associated with this single item. They also concluded that students do not find teachers' use of self-deprecating humor and humor directed at individual students effective ways to increase learning. Additionally, students indicated that their instructors' use of tendentious humor was not effective in generating affect. In sum, not all types of humor were viewed as equally appropriate or effective in the college classroom.

Finally, Gorham and Christophel (1990) noted that the amount and the type of humor influenced learning but not to the same extent as immediacy. Based on this data, they felt that the relationship between teachers' use of humor in the classroom and learning is best understood when considered along with teacher immediacy. Humor is one type of immediacy behavior that teachers can capitalize on in the classroom.

But just how appropriate are the categories of humor presented by Gorham and Christophel? In another humor study, high school teachers indicated that most of the humor categories were appropriate to use in the classroom. Two items were perceived by teachers to be marginally inappropriate for the classroom. These items were: "The teacher tells a personal anecdote or story not related to
the subject/topic” and “The teacher tells a general anecdote or story not related to the subject/topic.” High school teachers indicated that related humor was the most effective type of humor to use in the classroom. Additionally, teachers did not perceive self-deprecating humor and humor directed at individual students as inappropriate for the classroom. Thus, students and teachers may not see eye to eye on the types of humor that are most appropriate for the classroom (Neuliep, 1991).

The studies mentioned thus far have helped to clarify some of the types of humor that students and teachers deem appropriate for the classroom but what seems to be missing from the literature on humor in the classroom are examples of highly inappropriate or ineffective classroom humor. Teachers need to understand the types of humor that will not work in the classroom and may actually detract from learning. Wanzer and Frymier (1999) conducted exploratory work in this area and asked students to generate examples of inappropriate and appropriate teacher humor. The categories of appropriate teacher humor were very similar to many of those identified in the Gorham and Christopel study. Appropriate classroom humor included: related humor, unrelated humor, impersonation, nonverbal behaviors, disparaging humor, humorous props, sarcasm, and unintentional humor.

Interestingly, two of the inappropriate humor categories were also identified as appropriate for the classroom. For example, sarcasm and irrelevant/unrelated humor were both identified as appropriate and inappropriate types of teacher humor. We speculate that the differences in perceptions of teacher humor may stem from the type of teacher who is using the humor as opposed to the type of humor being used. For example, high HO teachers may be able to get away with using both sarcasm and unrelated humor and still be viewed as highly effective. On the other hand, low HO teachers may not be able to use any type of humor effectively in the classroom.

Other categories of inappropriate humor included: making fun of students, humor based on stereotypes, failed humor, sexual humor, swearing to be funny, joking about serious issues, and personal humor. A number of students indicated that it was very inappropriate to make fun of or pick on a student. Students felt that teachers should not single students out in class and make fun of them. Many commented that it was never appropriate to make fun of a student in class. Students also indicated that humor directed at certain groups and based on stereotypes should not be used in the classroom. The third most frequently recognized type of inappropriate humor, failed humor attempts, may be very difficult to monitor. How does a teacher know for certain when his or her humor attempts are going to fail? This data seems to indicate that students feel that teachers need to be in tune with what students may or may not find funny. Why do humor attempts fail? One explanation may be differences in interpretations of humor based on age, culture, sex, or life experience differences. If, for example, I refer to a funny episode of “Saturday Night Live” with the Mr. Bill character and no one has ever heard of him, they may perceive my humor as a failed attempt.
Suggestions for Using Humor
Effectively in the Classroom

Using humor in the classroom can be very challenging. In the final sections of this chapter a number of practical suggestions for using humor in the classroom are advanced. The suggestions offered are based on humor research, personal teaching experiences, and discussions with students and colleagues about their perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate classroom humor.

First, teachers should probably refrain from using humor that singles out or belittles a particular student. If students feel “picked on” or “belittled” they may be less likely to participate or attend class. One student commented that when observing a student getting made fun of by a professor he or she may laugh at the humorous attempt but later feels very sorry for the student who was singled out. Students also indicated that when the professor targets a particular student repeatedly the students in the class often view this behavior as verbally aggressive. According to Gorham and Christophel (1990), even highly immediate teachers should refrain from picking on students in an effort to be funny because this is viewed as behavior that is out of character.

While both related and unrelated humor can be effective in the classroom it is probably a good idea to link the humor to the subject matter when possible. Humorous examples, jokes, and stories can help the student recall the material later. If a student can recall the humor, he or she may also be able to recall the concept or theory that the professor was attempting to illustrate. I have seen some of my students years after having them in class and many will say that they remember a humorous story as well as the theory or concept that I was explaining at the time. While unrelated humor can also be effective in the classroom as an icebreaker or affinity-seeking strategy, it does not have the advantages of related humor. Unrelated humor can be distracting while humor that is integrated into the message content is easier to understand. In sum, the receiver does not have to struggle to “get” the related humor or make a mental detour to interpret the joke and then come back to the message (Gass & Seiter, 1999).

A number of researchers have noted that teachers use self-disparaging or self-deprecating humor in the classroom in an attempt to be funny. Teachers may feel that this type of humor is safe because they are the targets of the humor. However, realize that self-disparaging humor, while viewed as appropriate in the classroom, could damage one’s credibility. The research examining the effects of self-disparaging humor on persuasion has elicited mixed results. At times self-disparaging humor can enhance persuasiveness while at other times it can negatively affect perceptions of speaker persuasiveness. Some advice to follow when using self-disparaging humor is to avoid it if you feel that you have low credibility in the classroom. If, however, you feel that you possess a moderate to high amount of credibility in the classroom then “making light of your human frailties might make you appear more likeable and less pretentious” (Gass & Seiter, 1999, p. 275). Be sure to use self-disparaging humor in moderation because repeatedly putting yourself down could damage perceptions of your competence.
If you know that you are a low HO, or cannot tell a funny joke or story to save your life, then by all means do not attempt to tell funny jokes or stories in the classroom. If you are someone who has poor timing or delivery, or is unable to recall the punch line of jokes then do not use this type of humor. Remember that funny jokes and stories are only two of many types of humor that you have at your disposal.

Contemplate the type of humor that you are going to use in the classroom and make sure that it will be perceived as both funny and nonoffensive by your audience. Students indicated that sexual humor and humor based on stereotypes were inappropriate for the college classroom. We recommend that people refrain from using these types of humor in the classroom. Sexual humor and humor based on stereotypical behaviors of women could both be related to sexual harassment complaints from students. Conduct an audience analysis before choosing humorous messages. Be sure to realize that age, culture, gender, and life experiences of your audience will all influence interpretations of your humor. If you are using humorous examples from television shows or movies be sure that most of the students can identify the examples or characters that you are referring to in your lecture. If students do not understand the humor they will view it as a failed attempt and may be distracted from your lecture.

If you do not have any ideas about the kinds of humor to use in the classroom, observe a faculty member that uses humor regularly and effectively. Perhaps this colleague is a high HO and you can get some great ideas about different ways to incorporate humor into your repertoire of teaching behaviors. Generate discussions on humor in the classroom with colleagues, students, and researchers who study humor in an effort to understand why some types of humor may or may not work in the college classroom.

If you do not feel comfortable as the source of humor then use other types of humorous content in your teaching. Teachers can use humorous props which include cartoons, funny tapes or videotapes, handouts, disguises or hats, and which even direct students to humorous Web sites. Any type of humor incorporated into your teaching may be appreciated by students and viewed as a means of facilitating enjoyment of the classroom material.

If you are a high HO or someone who regularly uses humor in their teaching, realize that there is a saturation point. Students do not want their teachers to use excessive amounts of humor in their teaching. Too much humor can have a negative impact on learning. As Gorham and Christophel (1990) noted, “students might enjoy Joan Rivers as a teacher but put little stock in what she teaches them” (p. 59). Additionally, other researchers point out the fact that award-winning instructors use moderate amounts of humor (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988).

Finally, if you do not feel comfortable with any of the suggestions offered in this chapter and would never be the type of person to use humor in the classroom, then use verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors with your students as often as possible. Use of verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors can facilitate learning in the classroom. As stated previously, many of the behaviors that teachers use when they are being immediate (e.g., smiling, laughing, vocal variety, gestures) are the same ones that people use when they are being funny.
Final Remarks Related to
Humor Use in the Classroom

There is a substantial body of literature devoted to the use of humor in educational settings. Those who study and write about humor in educational settings are quick to identify a myriad of benefits associated with teachers’ humor use. For example, when teachers use humor their students learn more (Davies & Apter, 1980; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Ziv, 1979, 1988), evaluate their teachers more positively (Bryant, Crane, Cominsky, & Zillman, 1980), are more willing to participate in class (Korobkin, 1988), and report less anxiety (Long, 1983; Ziv, 1976). Additionally, teacher humor has been recognized as an effective classroom management tool with the power to establish or dissolve boundaries of a group, encourage creativity, motivate individuals, control conflict, and relieve stress (Wallinger, 1997). While there are numerous benefits to using humor in the classroom, it is important to note that not all teachers should be encouraged to immediately “jump on the humor bandwagon.” First, before utilizing humor as an instructional tool, it is important to understand more about how humor operates in the classroom. This chapter provided an overview of research on humor in the classroom as well as practical suggestions derived from this substantial body of literature.

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