

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,

