

# Evolving Toward Laughter in Learning

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*Lowman (1995) described the relationship between teacher and student and student engagement as the two most important ingredients in learning in higher education. Humour builds teacher-student connection (Berk, 1998) and engages students in the learning process. The bond between student and teacher is essential for learning, satisfaction, and retention. Humour helps students to learn better, remember more, improve problem-solving, absorb and retain information more quickly, and reduce their anxiety about subjects like math and science. Humour also reduces classroom management problems. This essay reviews research findings that support the use of humour in teaching and it provides strategies that teachers can use to bring more humour into their classrooms.*

## Introduction

As we explore the evolving scholarship of teaching and learning, it remains clear that motivational and interpersonal aspects of students' experiences are central to effectiveness. In fact, in his classic text on teaching mastery, Lowman (1995) identified the two most important ingredients of teaching to be teacher-student connection and student engagement. One powerful way both to enhance teacher-student relationships and to increase student engagement in learning experiences is to use humour in the learning environment.

The purpose of this essay is to share ideas, perspectives, and benefits related to laughter and humour in learning. After exploring the context and

reasons for using humour, I will provide specific possibilities and examples of how to include humour in university classes.

In addition to some of the apparent benefits of adding humour and laughter to learning experiences, most of us live in academic environments that would do well to increase their lightness. Perhaps Henry Kissinger said it best, "University politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small." When we learn to use humour in our classes, we may experience the pleasant side effect of building a more humorous perspective to counter our over-developed ability to take ourselves seriously.

## Support for Laughter and Humour in Learning

### Laughter helps you learn?

There are many general benefits of laughter including health (e.g., enhanced immune function, pain reduction, stress relief). With respect to pedagogical factors, laughter improves catecholamine levels, which increase mental functioning (Fry, 1984); and helps the functioning of both hemispheres of the brain (Derks, Bogart, Bartolome-Rull, & Gillikin, 1997; Goldstein, 1976; Svebak, 1982), which has a direct impact on learning; and inducing laughter prior to and during a topic primes students' brains to increase alertness and memory. Following laughter, there is also greater interpersonal responsiveness in question and answer sessions and cooperative learning activities.

### What about humour?

Similarly, humour offers a variety of general benefits beyond what is found in the classroom. For example, humour has the ability to sell, convince, entertain, and communicate. There are potential financial benefits of developing one's sense of humour as there appear to be both more job opportunities (applicants with a better sense of humour get more jobs) and promotions (those with jobs, other things being equal, tend to get more promotions when they are seen as having a sense of humour). Furthermore, humour can enhance overall well-being as it changes one's perspective away from stress. Henry Ward Beecher said, "A person without a sense of humour is like a wagon without springs – jolted by every pebble in the road."

For our focus here, what is essential is that humour builds the teacher-student connection (e.g., Berk, 1998), and this connection is essential for learning, satisfaction, and retention. As John Cleese put it, "If I can get you to laugh with me, you like me better, which makes you more open to my ideas." Humour engages students in the learning process and it can improve problem-solving and performance on right-hemisphere tasks (e.g., spatial-temporal reasoning; recognition). Studies (e.g., Bryant & Zillman, 1989;

Opplinger, 2003; Schmidt, 2002) have shown that with humour, (a) students learn better and remember more; (b) people absorb information more quickly; (c) many kinds of information are retained longer; (d) there is a reduction in anxiety about subjects like math and science; (e) there are fewer classroom management problems; and (f) students are more motivated to learn and retain information if they are happy and amused.

There is also an effect of humour on students' perceptions. For example, humour has been seen to increase students' enjoyment of learning, perceptions of how much they learned, and positive feelings about the course and instructor (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). A sense of humour is one of the most desirable characteristics of an effective teacher (Check, 1986; Fortson & Brown, 1998; Powell & Anderson, 1985).

### Using Humour in the Classroom

Many of our experiences as students and as teachers reinforce what is found in the literature about the advantages of having a classroom sprinkled with laughter and humour. Yet there are many reasons to beware using humour. Some forms of humour can hurt, create distance, and be counter-productive to teaching and learning (Table 1). We consistently seek positive humour to promote students' experiences and progress. Goodman (1983) provided a list of helpful comparisons to distinguish the kinds of humour we desire in class.

### Teaching Ideas for Humour in Your Classroom

There are many specific ways to bring humour into a college or university classroom. The list here includes ideas that do not rely on the instructor's comedic timing, or "being funny."

#### Read aloud something comical or begin class with an amusing overhead

A simple way to add humour and warm the mood of a class is to provide something amusing for students to look at or listen to as they enter the classroom.

### Use humorous quotations (on the class subject)

You can add mirth to a topic by searching out and sharing quotations. You can involve the class by having a box where students can share their own favourite quotations.

### Share personal humorous anecdotes

Our lives are filled with moments of levity, especially when we are able to laugh at ourselves. We can make ourselves more human and accessible by sharing our stories with students, and we can encourage students to do the same.

### Humour on course outlines

One of the first ways we “meet” our students is when they read our course outlines and handouts. Adding jocular remarks, cartoons, or bits of amusement will lighten what can be a bureaucratic document.

### Humour on exams

Especially for students who are anxious during a testing situation, humour on an exam can relieve stress and tension and enable students to perform more to their potential.

### Using games

One of my favourite ways to bring fun to the classroom is by creating games based on television shows such as “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” and “Jeopardy.” I have found that the games can be used to highlight or review important information and they do not necessarily have to be used in full. For example, five Jeopardy “answers” could focus on the main points from an article, along with substantial lecture- and discussion-time between each item.

### Faces, gestures, and movements

Sometimes lightening the classroom or bringing out a laugh is as simple as making a face or gesture. You may already have some “quirks” in your repertoire that you can use more intentionally. When the class is tense, the laughs often come easily when you make a clear move to relieve the tension.

### Using music

There are various methods to include music to alter the classroom ambience. Again, it need not be “funny” but it can make the environment more welcoming and comfortable. Playing tunes as students enter the class is one option. Using short clips during a presentation can help to make a point and increase attentiveness.

TABLE 1  
Constructive vs. Destructive Humour

Laughing With:	Laughing At:
1. going for the jocular vein	1. going for the jugular vein
2. based on caring and empathy	2. based on contempt and insensitivity
3. builds confidence	3. destroys confidence through put downs
4. involves people in the fun	4. excludes some people
5. a person makes a choice to be the ‘butt’ of a joke (laughing at yourself)	5. a person does not have a choice about being made the ‘butt’ of joke
6. amusing – invites people to laugh	6. abusing – offends people
7. supportive	7. sarcastic
8. brings people closer	8. divides people
9. leads to positive repartee	9. leads to one-downsmanship cycle
10. pokes fun at universal human foibles	10. reinforces stereotypes; singles out group

### Using movement (students)

A languid body is less engaged and short “body-breaks” or activities can generate fun and re-engage students. Like everything else in the world of humour, it is a matter of personal taste and what you find useful. After fifteen or twenty minutes in a lecture situation, students could take thirty seconds and simply stand up or do something more “silly” like a bit of the chicken dance.

### Using costumes/décor/props

For those of you who are concerned you do not have the delivery of Jerry Seinfeld or the story-telling brilliance of Bill Cosby, you can inject humour by coming to class in costume, using props (e.g., a magic wand), or decorating the class in some fashion. I have seen professors arrive as a historical figure or theoretician and present material from a first-person perspective. Students often greatly appreciate seeing us out of “uniform” and in costume.

### Forms of delivery

In addition to the specific ideas suggested so far, other forms of in-class delivery of humour include opening jokes, Top 10 lists, cartoons, skits/drama, and, perhaps the best humour is that which is spontaneous. Humour can be included on any form of written material as well as websites. An advantage of adding humour to a course website is that you can provide options that students can select or not based on their own personal preferences.

## Cautionary Notes and Closing Suggestions

The dictum, “when in doubt, leave it out” may be a helpful guideline for the use of humour. Some experts suggest the “AT&T Rule” proposing that all uses of humour should be appropriate, timely, and tasteful. Whereas we can go too far to the point of sterility, we want to do our best to avoid humour that will tend to alienate or create distance.

There are other specific concerns to be aware

of in order to use humour effectively in the classroom. Because some humour is culturally and historically dependent, it is important to be mindful of international students, and humour that relies on experiences that students have not shared. How well humour will work can also depend on how long the class has been together. Some humour may relieve first day jitters; other humour may succeed after the group has developed rapport and bonding.

We generally want to provoke some form of laughter when we deliver humour in our classes. Whether or not students laugh depends on many factors including the physical arrangement of the class, class size, class atmosphere, and the ability of students to make eye contact with one another and the instructor. A key point to remember is that humour tends to be based on building up tension and then some kind of punch-line resulting in laughter and a release of tension. Thus, when it’s clear that we have tried to be funny and there is no laughter, what remains is the built up tension. If we just move on without some response or acknowledgement, we are trying to teach through the tension. It is important to note that the joke was unsuccessful. Great comedians (recall Johnny Carson) often get their best laughs when a line fails. The “comeback” line allows the audience to laugh and relieve the tension. Sometimes it is as simple as saying “or not” or “you might have noticed I was trying to be funny.”

Like everything else in our teaching, the effective inclusion of humour is a matter of ongoing attempts, reflections, and refinements. Ultimately we hope that humour will enhance our relationships with our students and enable their engagement and learning. Good teaching is hard to define. It may be best to express the elements of good teaching in metaphors that invoke the imagination. Parker Palmer tells us that good teaching is akin to weaving a fabric of connectedness between student, teacher, and subject. The weaving cannot take place without a loom. The teacher is the loom on which the fabric is woven. The loom itself is a work in progress: to be available, teachers need “inner work.” Good teaching is not “the right move,” but rather it demands that I, as a teacher, question myself. The search for mirth keeps me in the exploration.

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