

## PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING

### Confessions From a Guy Who Teaches Humor

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Humor is an intriguing topic that exists in the contexts of adult education and human resource development. This paper describes my experiences at developing and facilitating a graduate course on humor and adult learning. Researchers and scholarly practitioners in adult education and human resource development are encouraged to build their understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and the practical applications of humor.

I have taught for 35 glorious years. My teaching gigs have included a high school, a post-secondary technical school, and five universities. Coming from a blue collar family, my chosen vocation seemed to get mixed reviews at family gatherings. Although my relatives were proud that I was somehow able to get into college, they surmised that my reason for doing so was to elude hard work. Hard work was easy to ascertain. If my hands were calloused, then I was earning my living. If my hands were as soft as a baby's butt, then my address was somewhere on easy street.

Given the preceding social backdrop, I am pretty cautious when a new acquaintance asks what I do for a living. Joe Q. Public already believes that professors work less than 4 hours a week. Imagine what Joe thinks when you teach a course on humor:

Joe: "So, what do you do for a living?"

Me: "I am a professor at Northern Illinois University"

Joe: "What do you teach?"

Me: "Humor"

Joe: (Inward reflection: There go my tax dollars.....why don't they have the Proxmire Golden Fleece Awards anymore?)

I know that I am privileged to work as a professor – I have considerable freedom to choose research and teaching topics that are meaningful to me. This brief article will describe why humor is my favorite teaching and research topic. The intent of the article is to encourage aspiring as well as seasoned scholars to not take crap about their passions.

### A Professor Walks Into a Bar (or a Curriculum Process)

How does one end up with a teaching and research agenda on humor? Why risk having the "serious" scholars on campus (who study vitally important things such as mushrooms, goat

phlegm, and grunge poetry) turn up their noses at me? Like most intriguing research topics, humor was a jock itch that begged to be scratched. A gap between research and practice caught my attention. My teaching evaluations from students consistently included positive comments about my use of humor in the classroom. How they perceived me as a teacher was greatly influenced by my applications of humor. I began to dig around a little on humor in theory and practice. I quickly found that teacher preparation programs did not help pre-service teachers understand the theory and practice of humor. Whereas my personal experience as a teacher led me to believe that humor could be used very effectively as a teaching tool, humor was ignored as a topic for prospective teachers. In the same vein, research on humor in adult education or human resource development was as hard to find as university administrators on the day when their salaries are published in the school paper.

Not knowing any better, I decided to develop a graduate level course on humor and adult learning. The target audience would be the master's and doctoral students in our large program that serves students in adult education, higher education, and human resource development.

Veteran professors will warn you that the curriculum process in a university moves slower than dial-up Internet. A request for a new course crawls through a resistant gridlock at several levels: program faculty, department, college, and university. The usual questions at the program and department level are:

Them: "How is a course on humor central to the program's goals or mission?"

Me: "It isn't."

Them: "Is this topic appropriate for a graduate level course?"

Me: "Evidently not here because the word humor is non-existent in the NIU Graduate School Catalog."

Them: "Can you benchmark this course against similar courses at other universities?"

Me: "There isn't another course on adult learning and humor on the planet. But space aliens might value it more...."

Them: "Which course or courses will the proposed course replace?"

Me: "Why don't we start with the ones that haven't been taught in the last 15 years?"

All of this jockeying did not deter me. I knew that humor is important in life. I saw great potential in linking humor literature with adult education. I firmly believed that humor is one of our best defenses against the many curveballs that life throws our way.

An interesting phenomenon happened in the College curriculum committee as it was considering my course proposal. A surly gas bag muttered, "Why would anyone take a graduate course on humor?" Given what the other committee members thought about his demeanor, they quickly voted that the university would be a better place with a course on humor, and they silently hoped that he would be the first person to sign up for it. Hence, the course was approved at the College level and moved forward.

Course proposals rarely sail through a university curriculum process. Typically somebody will crawl out from underneath a rock on the other side of campus and proclaim "Hold it, you can't teach that word because we own that word in our discipline." Such a claim can hold

up a new course proposal for months as the departments involved volley back and forth in games of power and compromise (i.e., We will sign off on course ABC if you change the pre-requisites for course XYZ and throw in a first round draft pick). However, with this humor course, no one wanted to touch it. The university community collectively sighed, “If Roth is foolish enough to think he can teach humor, let him go for it. He is crazy anyway, and if we approve this course on humor, maybe he will just go away and not cause any more problems.”

### **Humor and Other Things That Matter**

So, I built it and they came. A humor course and the students, that is. For me, teaching is a journey of mutual discovery with others. The discoveries are most enjoyable when the topic brims with meaning. Humor is a fascinating topic. Although not everything is funny, anything can be funny to somebody. The funniness does not reside in the incident, event, or in the joke – it resides in the individual’s head. And although humor exists in all cultures, it exists differently in each culture (Furman, 2001). Humor is a paradox that makes it a slippery slope in theory and practice. Consider, for example, the sense of humor. It is a very common phrase, yet scholars have not embraced a universal definition of it. Even though the phrase is contested in the literature (LaFave, Haddad, & Maeson, 1996), most people believe that having a sense of humor is generally a good thing (Martin, 2007). Chapman and Foot (1996) used the oft cited words of Frank Moore Colby to stress its desirability as a trait, “Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth or a wig. How many will own up to a lack of humour?” (p. 1).

Humor is an intriguing research construct that has sputtered and coughed a bit because it is spread across many disciplines. Its theory building has not benefited from accumulation like other topics that are housed in a neat and tidy discipline. However, the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS) ([www.hnu.edu/ishs](http://www.hnu.edu/ishs)) is a multi-disciplinary professional association that brings together scholars from many fields to share their research on humor. In addition to hosting annual conferences, the ISHS publishes *Humor: International Journal of Humor Studies*.

One can only cover so many topics in a three credit hour course. People have made connections between humor and just about everything under the sun. For those interested in humor and psychology, Martin (2007) created a thorough text, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. This text provides a nice backdrop of humor theories and links humor to a variety of psychology topics. He explains that “Whenever we laugh at something, we are experiencing an emotional high that is rooted in the biochemistry of our brains” (p. 7). Martin uses the word “mirth” as a term to depict this emotional state (p. 8). In the course that I teach, I touch upon this pleasant emotional state in three broad areas: health, wellness, death and dying; teaching and learning; and workplace. Our discussions often digress from these areas, and the literature related to these areas easily surpasses the amount of time that we have available for discussing them. Below are a few comments on each area.

#### *Health, Wellness, Death, and Dying*

Most of the graduate students who come into this course are aware of the purported health benefits of humor. Somewhere along the line they have heard the accolades of humor with regard to healthful living, reducing stress and tension, and the mental and physical aerobics of a

hearty laugh. The physiological benefits of humor are commonly mentioned in the literature. Fry (1992) has done seminal writing on the benefits of laughter and mirthful emotions. He noted how mirthful experiences have been explored regarding physical, emotional, and psychological changes. Research undertaken has pertained to “physiological activities involving the muscular, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, and central nervous systems” (Fry, 1992, p. 1857). His foundational work has inspired authors from nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and other allied health fields to link the physiological effects of humor to health and wellness.

Humor is a weapon that we use against life’s hurdles. All of us experience painful losses of loved ones and other personal trauma that can leave us in the depths of despair. Allen Klein (1998) has done some wonderful writing that gives us permission to keep humor in our lives during our bleakest moments. His book, *The Courage to Laugh*, encourages readers to recognize the importance of humor in times of death and dying. Referring to the work of George Bernard Shaw, he reminds us that life does not stop being funny when people die any more than it stops being serious when people laugh (cited in Klein, 1998). He helps us understand that for many people humor is an important part of living. And even though people might have a serious illness, perhaps a terminal illness, they want to be treated as though they are a live person, not someone who is already dead. Sharing humor is a way to celebrate each remaining heartbeat. Klein (1998) explains the power of humor:

No matter what kind of life-changing adversity people are facing, humor, like prayer, provides hope. In both laughter and prayer, we go beyond the world as we know it, transcending our predicament. We may not like the situation that we are in, but whereas anger may draw us into our dilemma, a chuckle, like a prayer, can help us rise above it. (p. 14)

You might wonder why I would include topics on health, wellness, death, and dying in a course on humor and adult learning. For me, it is an easy connection. Lindeman helped adult educators understand the alignment between living and learning. Mezirow helped us understand the transformative power of learning. Humor is another defense that helps adults face challenges in life – it feeds our resilience to life’s challenges and helps us cope with the most trying of times. Most of my students understand pain and loss. From their personal experiences they have learned how humor can help them cope with adversity. Studying the theory and application of humor in connection to personal loss has helped them to better understand the existence of humor during life’s most trying moments.

### *Teaching and Learning*

Humor has been associated with many claims about teaching and learning, such as enhancing creative thinking and recognizing incongruities; increasing group cohesion; relieving stress and tension; motivating students and boosting attention; building classroom climate, and establishing rapport with learners.

For any of these claims to come to fruition, the facilitator needs to develop skills and understanding of practical applications of humor. In addition to the theoretical readings that I use

for my class (e.g., Attardo (1994), Haig (1988), Gruner (2000), and Latta (1999) -- many of which are definitely NOT funny), I also use Berk's (2003) book, *Professors are From Mars, Students are From Snickers*. This text encourages educators to creatively stretch with humor. Berk is well known for his funny yet practical books about humor and teaching. Although I order more than enough of this text each semester from the bookstore, the shelf is often running low by the time the course starts. How many texts do you know of that disappear off the bookstore shelf before the course's students can even get to it? Then again, how many college texts have a topical index that includes "Buford's Bulldozer Repairs; Elmo, Tickle Me; Tea Tests; or Head, Mr. Potato"? This book provides tips on finding humorous materials, delivering humor effectively, and applying humor in the classroom. Berk has a very unique writing style that tests the serious nature of academic writing. Derks (2007) cautioned practitioners about the utility of Berk's applications of humor:

The type of humor he uses pushes the concept of "playful incongruity" to the limit, and the discovery of "relevance" or "appropriateness" is a real challenge. Not all of us are so capable and Berk suggests, firmly and correctly, that we get student feedback on the success of this stuff. He is successful. His sophomoric wit, complete with costumes, even appeals to graduate students. His classes report that the interventions are enjoyable, interesting, and anxiety reducing. The evidence for increased learning, however, is skimpy. (p. 212)

Our class discussions of this book are typically twofold: (a) We recognize the creativity needed to purposefully apply humor to teaching and learning transactions, and (b) we acknowledge the need for research to substantiate claims made about humor and learning.

### *Humor and the Workplace*

Humor can be examined in the workplace in many ways. Duncan, Smeltzer, and Leap (1990) reviewed management-related literature on humor and segmented it into four broad areas: "leadership, power and status relationships; group cohesiveness; the effects of humor on communication in group settings; and, the role of humor in organizational cultures" (p. 267). Barsoux (1996) noted that more than a half a century ago, in the Hawthorne Studies, Elton Mayo and his team of researchers acknowledged spontaneous humor as an important feature of the informal social processes in the workplace.

Humor is shared with others in a social context. Unique nuances of humor will be found within specific occupations and embedded in workplaces. Emergency responders, nurses, law officers, teachers, fire fighters, and others have humor that is shared with peer workers within the inner sanctums of work contexts. Fine and DeSoucey (2005) explain that joking cultures are unique and definitive segments of organizational cultures. Workers will make references to the joking culture as part of the history of a work group and/or organization – the humorous incidents are embedded within the history and the context of the work setting. Humor applications in the workplace are purposeful. "Elements of the joking culture serve to smooth group interaction, share affiliation, separate the group from outsiders, and secure the compliance of group members through social control" (Fine & DeSoucey, 2005, p. 1). Humor tactics are used to form close bonds among workers or let others know that they are not part of the inner

circle. Patients, clients, customers, managers, or others outside of the group might find the humor inappropriate. However, appropriateness of humor is a personal judgment. The humor is used to help these workers deal with stress, relieve tension, or cope with difficult or even traumatic aspects of their work.

Because it involves playing incongruities and contradictory ideas and conveys multiple meanings at once, humor is a particularly useful form of communication in situations in which a more serious and direct mode runs the risk of being too confrontational, potentially embarrassing, or otherwise risky. (Martin, 2007, p. 17)

The students in my classes come from diverse occupational backgrounds. Our discussions lead to connections between humorous workplace incidents and humor theory.

### **The Paradox of Humor**

Humor is applied for a variety of purposes in our lifeworlds. We find it in classrooms, workplaces, homes, communities, churches, hospitals, relationships, and so forth. Although it commonly leads to mirthful emotions, the way it gets us there can vary considerably, as depicted by Martin (2007):

Humor, then, is inherently neither friendly nor aggressive: it is a means of deriving emotional pleasure that can be used for both amiable and antagonistic purposes. This is the paradox of humor. If one's goal is to strengthen relationships, smooth over conflicts, and build cohesiveness, humor can be useful for those purposes. On the other hand, if one's goal is to ostracize, humiliate, or manipulate someone, or to build up one's status at the expense of others, humor can be useful for those purposes as well. (p. 19)

I try to help our students understand the theoretical underpinnings and the purposes of humor. They learn that the common phrase "appropriateness of humor", like many other research constructs within adult education and human resource development, depends....

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Prior to coming to NIU in 1985, he worked as an Assistant/Associate Professor and program coordinator at Idaho State University, Assistant Professor at Southeast Missouri State University, and instructor at the University of South Dakota. Prior to his university work, he was a high school vocational teacher, architectural drafter, factory worker, and farmer.

His research interests include learning to learn, humor and adult learning, international adult education, and human resource development. He has published over 65 refereed journal articles, and he has numerous other book chapters, monographs, and conference publications and presentations. Dr. Roth has been the principal investigator of over 30 research projects with budgets that have totaled over \$1.5 million.

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Dr. Roth recently concluded nine years of service on the Board of the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD), including a two year term as President. The AHRD is the leading professional organization in the world that is focused on leading the field of HRD through research. He has also served on the Board of the Foundation of the AHRD, the Management Board of the *Human Resource Development International*, and he continues to serve on the Editorial Board of the *Asia Pacific Education Review*. He is a reviewer for the *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education*, *International Journal of Training and Development*, and *Human Resource Development Review*. In addition, he has lifetime memberships in the American Association of Adult Continuing Education, American Association of Career and Technical Education, and the Illinois Association of Career and Technical Education.