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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effectiveness of humor on reducing students' stress and tensions as well as the fostering of a positive environment, thus enhancing learning. A survey assessing classroom teachers' use of humor consisting of 10 items was administered to a sample population of 65 high school sophomores. Results were analyzed in terms of number of students who selected each response and the percentage each response was chosen. Results indicated that over 55% of the students reported that the use of humor in the classroom was effective in reducing stress and tension and creating a more positive classroom environment. The use of humor also contributed to a positive rapport between the teacher and the students. Findings suggest that students perceived humor as an effective tool in the classroom environment. A sample survey is attached. Contains 2 tables of data and 81 references. (Author/BT)

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THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS
OF THE USE OF HUMOR IN THE
CLASSROOM SETTING

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Master of Arts Degree Program

Salem-Teikyo University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

SO 029 847

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May 1998

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This thesis submitted by Karen E. Steele has been approved meeting the research requirements for the Master of Arts Degree.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of humor on reducing students' stress and tension as well as the fostering a positive environment, thus enhancing learning. This investigation explored the following research questions:

1. Does humor reduce student stress and tension in the classroom?
2. Does humor help to foster a more positive environment?
3. Is the student/teacher relationship enhanced by a degree of humor in the classroom?
4. What are the negative forms of humor that should not be incorporated into a classroom?
5. Can humor improve attention and facilitate learning and retention?

A survey assessing classroom teachers' use of humor consisting of 10 items was administered to a sample population of 65 high school sophomores. Survey results were analyzed in terms of number of students who selected each response and the percentage each response was chosen. Results indicated that over 55% of the students reported that the use of humor in the classroom was effective in reducing stress and tension and creating a more positive classroom environment.

Survey items 1,2, and 10 addressed research question one. The responses were tabulated and converted into percentages for comparisons. In excess of 75% of the students surveyed rated humor effective in reducing student stress and tension. This indicated that these students felt more at ease to participate and looked forward to attending such a class.

Research question two was addressed by survey question nine. Over one-half of the students felt that humor helped to foster a positive classroom environment.

Items 3 and 5 on the survey answered research question three. Sixty-five percent of the students perceived the teacher who used humor in the classroom as approachable. One-half of the students surveyed believed that the teacher/student relationship was enhanced by a degree of humor in the classroom. When students perceive a teacher as approachable, the teacher/student relationship is enhanced.

Research question four was addressed by survey items four and seven. Survey item 4 examined the students perceptions regarding a negative type of humor. The percentages were too close to draw a conclusion. Survey item 7 indicated that almost two-thirds of the students felt that humor should not be used to embarrass or ridicule while a small percentage felt that it was appropriate.

Survey items 6 and 8 addressed the use of humor to facilitate learning and retention of more difficult subject matter. Almost one-half rated humor as effective in accomplishing this whereas less than 2% disagreed. Almost three-fourths of students surveyed perceived humor as helpful in both adding to their attention level and keeping their interests.

Humor was useful in reducing stress and tension, retention of more difficult subject matter, and enhancing learning by increasing attention. The use of humor also contributed to a positive rapport between the teacher and students. This investigation indicated that students perceived humor as an effective tool in the classroom environment.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION	1
Research Questions	2
Limitations	3
Assumptions.....	3
Definition of Terms	3

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Psychological Benefits of Humor	5
Sociological Benefits of Humor	7
Educational Benefits of Humor	9
Classroom Issues Related to Humor	13
Cognitive Benefits of Humor	14
Physiological Benefits of Humor.....	15
Units and Types of Humor.....	17
Guidelines for Using Humor in the Classroom	17

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS AND PROCEDURES.....	23
The Research Population	23
The Research Setting.....	23
The Research Design.....	23

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS25

Analysis of Results25

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS30

A Concluding Remark30

REFERENCES

APPENDICES

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

What common factors come to mind when one hears the word “humor”? Perhaps terms such as relaxation, euphoria, laughter, and fun would be obvious choices. These are only a few of the numerous attributes associated with humor. Humor is not a state of mind but a state of being.

Imagine being a typical high school student in today’s society attending a newly consolidated 1,200 student body high school. The bell rings, setting off one’s internal alarm. The heart races and adrenaline rushes throughout the body as the search for a familiar face begins. To no avail, one apprehensively approaches his or her first period class destination. On the journey, one encounter shadowy blank faces, ringing out chants, “get to your class immediately” “four tardies and you face detention.” As quickly as one’s feet transport him or her, the destination is finally reached. Searching desperately for an empty seat in the back of the room, one crashes into a classmate who was just a little quicker; a member of the track team no doubt! Reluctantly one is seated front row, center seat. In walks somberly, a foreboding figure. Sauntering slowly as the final bell ring, the mouth slowly opens and one awaits another ludicrous, lengthy oration regarding rules of conduct, consequences, and the fate of his or her *assumed* demise. “Welcome, it’s nice to see all these new faces. From time to time as a test of my memory, please attend class sporadically to see if I really put names and faces together properly. In addition, it’s not a sign of good manners to wear out your welcome.” A roar of laughter and puzzled faces fill the room. Replacing the tension and anxiety are relaxation and pleasure.

What brought about the differences in the atmosphere of the classroom? From the moment of anticipation and apprehension, there arose such negative feelings that one might believe this environment was hostile and unfriendly. The teacher, in a role, not uncommon to many classrooms, also anticipated the jitters experienced by the students. Doing what he/she does best, the teacher tries to present the classroom environment as one that is welcoming, friendly, and non-threatening, yet one in which learning can be facilitated. Learning may be facilitated even easier since one of the barriers has been lowered. Education, even in the best of conditions, is a difficult situation with all of the problems existing in the typical classroom. This teacher successfully eliminated tension and anxiety from the classroom, thus lessening the anticipation and apprehension among the students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This investigation explored the following questions:

1. Does humor reduce student stress and tension in the classroom?
2. Does humor help to foster a more positive environment?
3. Is the student/teacher relationship enhanced by a degree of humor in the classroom?
4. What are the negative forms of humor that should not be incorporated into a classroom?
5. Can humor improve attention and facilitate learning and retention?

LIMITATIONS

This study contained the following limitations:

1. The sample was limited only to Robert C. Byrd High School sophomores enrolled in Coordinated and Thematic Science 10.
2. No pre- or post-test was used.
3. This study was limited to student surveys.
4. The difficulty associated in operationally defining humor.
5. The effects of humor may vary according to student perceptions of humor.

ASSUMPTIONS

The following assumptions were made concerning this study:

1. The sample was adequate in size.
2. The students in the sample were typical sophomore high school students.
3. The instrument was valid.
4. The time frame for the study was adequate.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following terms (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992) were defined as they applied within the context of this study:

humor- the quality that makes something laughable or amusing

sarcasm-a cutting, often ironic remark, intended to wound

satire- irony, sarcasm, or caustic wit used to attack or expose folly, vice, or stupidity

irony- the use of words to express something different from and often opposite to the literal meaning

ridicule- words or actions intended to evoke contemptuous laughter at or feelings toward a person or thing

joke- something said or done to evoke laughter or amusement especially with an amusing story with a punchline

pun- a play on words or different senses of the same word and sometimes on the similar sense or sound of different words

riddle- anything that arouses curiosity or perplexes

nonsexual hostile humor- humor without a sexual theme that puts down a person or thing

sexual nonhostile humor- humor that refers to sex organs or sexual activities

sexual hostile humor- humor that involves sexual content and puts down a person or thing

nonsense- words or signs having no intelligible meaning; foolish or absurd

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Humor permeates society. It is found in the home, the workplace, and in any other place people congregate. As the above example illustrates, if effectively used, humor may even have a place in the classroom. The increasing use of humor in today's society is credited to its various therapeutic functions. Cheatwood has written, "If we fail to take humor into account...we have lost not just an enumeration of particular functions it can serve...we shall have overlooked an important lens for examining the very structure of that behavior" (Duncan & Feisal, 1989). The various functions alluded to by Cheatwood and other scholars and researchers, since, can be categorized as psychological, sociological, educational (communication value), and physiological. The stresses and tension present in students' lives do not end with their arrival at school. Instead they are faced with a multitude of stressors. Such stressors arise from both the educational system and the act of growing up as a social being (Lefcourt & Martin, 1988). Stress, for example, is as much a part of the classroom as it is outside the classroom: concern about grades, assignments, relationships, self-confidence, self-esteem, personal problems, peer pressure, athletics, etc. abound in most classrooms (Rainsberger, 1994). Teachers have no control over stresses external to the educational environment, but they do have some control of stresses inherent in the classroom.

Psychological Benefits of Humor

John F. Kennedy was reported to have said, "There are three things which are real: God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension. So we must do what we can with the third" (Hunsaker, 1988). One of the things which can be

done with humor is to take advantage of its coping mechanism or psychological benefits. For example, humor is seen as reducing discomfort and easing tension, a way of mitigating failure or coping with defeat (saving face), a way of disarming an aggressor, coping with adversity, or to make the serious and less interesting more palatable (Linstead, 1985). Humor can serve as an outlet (though temporary) for frustration, apathy, resentment, hostility and anger; it can offer an escape from the harshness of reality and lighten the burdens present in the classroom (Weaver, 1987).

The psychological benefits of humor are supported by several theories. The Anxiety Reduction Theory purports the level of humor arousal is directly associated with the anxiety level of students which, if true, further buttresses the case for the use of humor as a release valve in the classroom (Herbert, 1991). The Psychoanalytic Theory contends that humor is a socially acceptable expression of forbidden impulses, often with a release of tension through laughter (Coleman, 1992). Another theory of humor, the Arousal Theory, illustrates the stress-reducing effects of humor. This theory explains the function of laughter as that of reducing built-up tension and energy (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986). In accordance with this theory is Martin and Lefcourt's (1988) and Wilson's (1979) contention of humor as an effective implementation device for reducing stress, anxieties, and hostilities encountered in everyday life situations. Martin and Lefcourt (1988) contend that nurturing children's sense of humor may arm them with a coping skill to combat the stresses of life. Freud (1960) labeled humor as, "the highest of the defensive processes (i.e., defense mechanisms)." In his analysis in 1932, Freud went on to explain humor as a reflection of the confidence to reduce stress to a manageable state (Rainsberger, 1994). Similarly, laughter was seen as a means of burning off extra energy or tension (Martin & Lefcourt, 1986). Martin and Lefcourt attribute this stress reducing

effect of humor to its capability of allowing people to put distance between themselves and the problem at hand. Korobkin, (1988); Long, (1983); Ziv, (1976); Dixon, (1973); Gilland and Mauritsen, (1971) in accordance with Martin and Lefcourt's (1988) and Wilson's (1979) contention, believe that humor may be a classroom advantage by reducing fears and anxieties of students. Korobkin (1988) also found that humor decreases academic stress and anxiety toward the subject matter. Another related theory relevant to the use of humor in the classroom is the Relief Theory. Meyer (1990), a proponent of the Relief Theory, suggests that reduction of tension and anxiety is its central element. Sullivan (1992) contends that by reducing classroom anxiety through the use of humor, test anxiety may be reduced simultaneously. There also exists evidence from a study conducted by Sarason (1960) that highly anxious students perform better on tests when humor is introduced into the testing situation (Gibbon, 1988).

Another psychological implication of humor is the enhancement of learners' self-esteem (Pollak & Freda, 1997). A successful learning process involves the assumption, "I can do it." Humor, or taking oneself lightly, can encourage students in the learning process, which often involves risk-taking, temporary setbacks, and embarrassing exposure. Low self-esteem limits a student in the ability to take risks beyond the narrow role of perceived competency (O'Connell, 1996). By using humor and the skill of laughing at oneself, a student can be more self-forgiving, thereby allowing himself or herself to become lost in the learning process.

Sociological Benefits of Humor

The sociological implications of humor are equally telling. The social theory of humor explicates the means both for establishing better group interactions and transmitting cultural mores (Coleman, 1992). One of the major functions of schools is socialization:

to acculturate knowledgeable, understanding, compassionate, and empathic new members to society (Callahan, Clark, & Kellough, 1992). Effective teachers are individuals, according to Hageseth (1995), who can “take themselves lightly, but take their work and life seriously as they encourage others to do likewise.” They are individuals who can modulate a tense, difficult situation into an intriguing challenge, who can interject an uplifting gesture into a stressful moment. As such, teachers can encourage students to appreciate the universality of the human condition, that all are here to make the world work by complementing one another (Pollak & Freda, 1997). Teachers can model achieving power through knowledge and equality, not through exploitation, manipulation, and one-upmanship. Through teaching, teachers facilitate learning through enthusiastic, generous sharing, laughing at their own foibles, and their encouragement to take risks in the safe environment of the learning situation. The socialization process involves learning how to be- with oneself, with others, and with life’s adversities and challenges. Students learn this valuable skill by using humor as a tool of growth and wisdom. Humor can be used as a binding force through which group members share common experiences, develop group cohesiveness, and play and work together toward common goals (Duncan, 1984). Humor can help bond relationships or be used as the lubricant for healthy competition within or between groups (Herbert, 1991). Similarly, earlier studies indicate that humor increases social cohesiveness in bureaucracies (Blau, 1955) and has a positive impact on interpersonal relations and group cohesion (Bergler, 1956). In general, humor, when used appropriately, can be an effective tool for socialization whereby a stimulus is created triggering improved intra/intergroup and interpersonal relations (Krohe, 1987).

Educational Benefits of Humor

Humor serves many educational (communication) functions as well. Maslow, after all, defines humor and laughter as “education in a palatable form” (Weaver & Cotrell, p. 168). Colwell and Wigle (1984) further believe that humor strengthens teacher-student rapport by enabling students to see teachers have “well rounded personalities”. Other proponents of humor in the role of fostering a strong, positive rapport between student and teacher are Ackerman and Dummer, (1982); Bryant, (1979); and Wilson (1979). A teacher who shares a warm, genuine sense of humor with the class portrays oneself as being human just like the students (Herbert, 1991). Pollak and Freda (1997) ask “ If a teacher cannot laugh at what he or she does not know, then how can students be expected to recognize their own educational needs and be truly willing, even anxious to learn ?” For example, if an English teacher puts a sentence on the board to label parts of speech and a student points out a mistake the teacher has made in labeling one of the more complicated components, that teacher has several options. One is to deny the mistake; another is to pretend the mistake was made on purpose; another is to own the error, thereby revealing his or her humanness and ability to recover. Therein lies the humor, the ability to enjoy a joke at one’s own expense. Students are endeared to that teacher because of the willingness of the “authority figure” to dethrone himself or herself to model the learning process in its reality. The reality of learning is that trial and error, stumble and recovery, are not only inevitable but crucial for real learning to take place. If a teacher can laugh at himself or herself and laugh with (never at) students, the teacher is well on the way to establishing a positive climate and eliminating much of the stress that is often present in classrooms today. Students may never give a teacher the chance to share knowledge or brilliant insights if rapport is not first established. Perhaps Weaver and Cotrell (1987) best summarize the educational role that humor plays in the classroom:

A warm, genuine, sense of humor can reveal humanness- a comfortable, secure attitude with themselves as instructors, with their course material (knowledge), with their students, and with their relationship with students. Certainly, one of the important benefits of humor is that it breeches the broad gap between instructors and students. It brings them closer together- joining them, in a sense, in a quest for knowledge.

When teachers confront negative students with humor, they often find that this use of humor is an effective way to diffuse the students' anger and hostility (Pollak & Freda, 1997). Humor is a powerful tool in education and can be used within the classroom to put the students at ease and make the learning process more enjoyable. As educators become active participants in their students' laughter, they will have an opportunity to become engaged with them (Ackerman & Dummer, 1982). A humorous response exerts a powerful force over a tense situation. Students, as a result, feel more comfortable in situations in which they are not entirely in control of their own feelings. Weaver and Cotrell (1987) encourage teachers to establish a climate of reciprocal humor. Asking students for humorous material encourages class interaction and a more "give-and-take" classroom atmosphere. Humor "...has a central place whether as a natural product or as a life-saving response to the exigencies of the institution - boredom, ritual, routine, regulations, oppressive authority" (Gibbon, 1988). Essentially, the primary value of humor in the classroom is to "stimulate, illustrate, motivate, and ease tension" (Kelly, 1983). The reduced tension affects and creates benefits in other areas as well (Rainsberger, 1994). Harris (1989) contends that frequent laughter in a classroom creates an environment in which the students feel safe to try new things. Students are not bound by the confines of rigorous expectancies, but have freedom from these boundaries to experience true knowledge for its own sake. Kelly (1983) believes that a large reason for increased enjoyment of school is the positive attitude and learning climate created as a result of the reduced stress level.

Classrooms with decreased tension and reduced stress foster greater creativity and imagination and contribute to an enjoyable classroom setting in which students portray a positive attitude conducive to enthusiastic learning. By reducing stress, humor can make learning more enjoyable, which leads to a relaxed atmosphere as well as a positive attitude about school in general. Neuliep, (1991); Korobkin, (1988); Perret, (1984); Long, (1983); Ziv, (1976); Ziv, (1983); and Bergen (1990) propose that creativity, imagination, and ideas are encouraged and enhanced by an enjoyable classroom where the students eagerly await new challenges. Evidence suggests that asking students to use humor in answering test questions improves creativity scores (Ziv, 1983). Humor may legitimize nonconventional, divergent thinking. Instructors may be surprised to see answers that contain unexpected consequences, curious but relevant bisociations, fusion of several “apparently” incompatible perspectives, unusual but pertinent ideas- all elements typical of humor. Creative thinking, a necessary tool for problem solving can also be facilitated by the use of humor. When employing brainstorming techniques, for example, if a teacher offers a thought that is “ incongruous or unexpected or incompatible” (Fry & Allen, 1996), that input can help students see a situation in two very rational but drastically different perspectives. Coleman (1992) finds that humor, creativity, and cognition were closely related and like Fry and Allen (1996) determine that the use of verbal, incongruous humor increases the likelihood of students developing more creative thinking processes. The essence of creative thinking therefore, is that ability to perceive situations from various points of view. The old adages “The grass is greener on the other side, but pity the man who has to mow it” and “Every cloud has a silver lining, but unfortunately every silver lining comes with its cloud” are examples of perspective. Humor, then as an educational benefit, has as its chief function, the ability to unhitch blinders, to rattle perceptions, to help one look at one thing and see another (in a creative sense) as in the

old Chinese parable: If a man is sitting on a horse facing the rear, why does one assume that it is the man who is backwards? (Herbert, 1991). If students are to be problem solvers, they must be able to see mutually incompatible frames of reference. Humor, particularly the use of unusual or even absurd examples, can accentuate those incompatibilities and insights (Pollak & Freda, 1997).

Humor is an effective device in interpersonal communication skills. Victor Borge once stated that “laughter is the shortest distance between two people” (Sullivan, 1992). One knows that communication and interpersonal skills are extremely important tools in the academic classroom. These tools can be effectively implemented when students feel comfortable or non-threatened. Many scholars argue that the use of humor aids in creating an open communication climate in the classroom (Herbert, 1991; Korobkin, 1988; Perret, 1984; Long, 1983; Ziv, 1983; Mogavero, 1979; Ziv, 1976; Dixon, 1973; Gilland & Mauritsen, 1971; and Coser, 1960). Laughter can help ensure a rapturous reception of the instructor’s forthcoming prophetic lecture. In addition, laughter is seen to coordinate human interaction as a turn-taking cue, approval and invitation for the hearer to respond in kind, an invitation to elaborate, and a resource in affiliation (O’Donnell-Trujillo & Adams, 1983).

Power struggles often surface in classrooms. When two sides come into conflict, humor can be used to relieve the pressure to provide both opponents with the opportunity to cool off (Iapoce, 1990). In such situations, humor provides the teacher with the chance to rethink the situation and react with a rational consequence as opposed to a punishment established out of stress and anger (Curwin & Mendler, 1990). Such a rational response spares the child’s self-esteem. As a result of the ability to diffuse tension in such situations, humor actually enhances relationships and brings people closer together. “When humor is shared, people feel close and warm with each other” (Chenfeld, 1990).

Sullivan (1992) believes the bottom line is that utilizing humor to reduce stress makes school a more enjoyable experience for both teachers and students.

Classroom Issues Related to Humor

Humor is also positively tied to a number of classroom issues. It is proposed to be a successful teaching tool when the topic of the class is of a sensitive nature (Johnson, 1990). Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman (1979) further purport that humor makes taboo subjects more acceptable.

There exists evidence, both anecdotal and empirical, to suggest that humor can serve as an aid in behavior management. Ackerman and Dummer (1982) advocate that humor is one of several preventative techniques to counteract undesirable behavior primarily because of its ability to reduce tension. One tedious required task in the classroom is familiarizing students with rules and expectations. Students are less reluctant to accept and adhere to rules if delivered in a non-threatening, non-confrontational style. One particular professor of communication studies devised a listing of classroom rules and entitled it "Rules With A Grin". In this listing, Proctor's (1994) delivery of rules was facilitated by the humorous handout and willingly accepted and adhered to. When students enjoy being in a particular setting, behavior problems logically reduce, allowing for greater listening and retention of material (Sullivan, 1992). Goor (1989) views humor as an alternative to authoritarian discipline. He observes a principal and two teachers in a school and discovers that humor is likely to result from one or several of the teacher behaviors: (1) connecting personally with students; (2) enlivening the learning experience; (3) using alternatives to authoritarian discipline; and (4) encouraging risk-taking and higher level thinking. It serves a dual purpose of maintaining order as well as a pleasant learning atmosphere.

Cognitive Benefits of Humor

Many studies indicate that humor has cognitive benefits for children. The cognitive theory outlines the development of a sense of humor as corresponding to the stages of intellectual development (Jalongo, 1985; Tamshiro, 1979). Humor, when used effectively and appropriately, helps students learn in some way. Reluctant students attention may be maintained by a lighter, humorous touch delivered by the teacher (Pollak & Freda, 1997). Students tend to remember teachers who take the trouble to express their messages in unusual ways. Csikszentmihlayi and McCormack (1995) tell the story of a student who remembers his teacher, Mr. C because "he has a special way of thinking that catches your attention. He makes brains go, he makes brains think, and he says things in a way that you just can't forget them." Enthusiastic teachers spend time thinking about ways to present information in positive ways that will be memorable for students. This light touch affects not only attention-getting goals, but also creativity, ingenuity, participation, and pride of ownership. Chenfeld (1990) cites a clinical psychologist as well as her own teaching experience in claiming that, in classes where teachers encourage laughter, students learn and retain more information. Whitmer (1986) is more specific in advocating humor to develop students' critical thinking skills. A study by Davies and Apter (1980) at incorporates humorous versus non-humorous slide tape presentations. This study reveals that students learn more in the humorous presentation. A similar study by Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) examines the effects of humor and humorous examples upon the comprehension and retention of lecture material. A test of comprehension and retention was given twice: immediately following the lecture then six weeks later. Results indicate that immediate comprehension was not facilitated by the use of humorous examples. Upon retesting, however, retention of concept humor material was significantly improved by viewing a lecture with humorous examples illustrating concepts. Vance (1987)

likewise studied the effect of humor on recognition and recall of information. He discovered that humor is an effective aid, but only when the humor is contiguous to the instruction. Humor is shown to develop higher-order thinking skills and create modes of thinking that are investigative, seeking, grasping, and filled with trial and error (Nilsen, 1987). Humor, while breaking down stress, acts as an elixir which soothes the mind into thinking more clearly about higher order relationships (Herbert, 1991). Alice Isen, a psychologist at the University of Maryland in Baltimore, believes that humor can bridge the right and left hemispheres of the brain, converting an “Ha-Ha” into an “Aha!” (Herbert, 1991). Sullivan (1992) suggests encouraging students to use topic-related puns and humorous comments which require higher level thinking skills, thus challenging students to think.

Physiological Benefits of Humor

In addition to instructional benefits, humor, under certain conditions may be physiologically therapeutic. Humor and laughter are healthy. A good laugh improves blood flow, increases oxygen in the blood, exercises lungs, diaphragm, and face muscles, and releases a natural pain killer into the body’s system (Cornett, 1986). In addition, because of the increase in endorphin secretion, pain decreases and pleasure increases (Herbert, 1991). This increased feeling of exhilaration may be accounted for by using a chemical explanation. Laughing promotes the production of catecholamine, which increases alertness. This leads to reduced feelings of stress and tension. If pleasure, exhilaration, and alertness are increased, it is only logical to experience a decrease in tension and stress as these two are incompatible states (Rainsberger, 1994). The work of Norman Cousins (1979, 1989) has done a great deal to popularize the notion that laughter heals. Similarly Robinson (1977, 1983) has done extensive research into the positive

curative role humor plays in the healing process. Peter and Dana (1982) advocate the use of humor as a preventative health measure. They contend that laughter, and plenty of it helps to increase the intake of oxygen to the blood; exercises muscles, particularly the lungs and diaphragm; and produces endorphins, the body's natural pain killers. Likewise, Fry (1963) examined the effects of laughter and humor on physical health. Both were found to reduce the incidence of heart disease, strokes, depression, cancer, and other stress related conditions. The functions of the brain have even been shown to be impacted by the use of humor. In terms of left brain /right brain differences, Svebak (1977) found that laughter heightened functioning of both sides of the brain simultaneously, which resulted in producing an unusually high level of consciousness and information processing in the brain, thereby allowing the brain to reach a higher level of capacity. In such a state, the individual has the ability to see both the abstract, subtle nuances of a problem and its more concrete, logical aspects at the same time. Similarly, Gardner (1981) found that laughter brought about similar simultaneous heightening of brain hemispheres in patients with brain damage. Rapp (1951) posits that a sense of humor is, in truth, human invention of the first magnitude ...Laughter is healthful. It is beneficial to the body." Physician, J.T. Walsh concluded after ample research that:

The effect of laughter upon the mind not only brings relaxation with it, so far as mental tension is concerned, but makes it also less prone to dreads and less solicitous about the future. This favorable effect on the mind influences various functions of the body and makes them healthier than would otherwise be the case (Moody, 1978).

Colwell and Wigle (1984) argue that humor also has affective benefits. They cite learning theorists to support their beliefs that humor can motivate students who are bored or stressed or who have negative attitudes toward school. Korobkin (1988) found that humor increases motivation towards and satisfaction with learning.

Units and Types of Humor

A study by Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman (1979), examines and codes six units of humor commonly used in the classroom. The units are as follows: jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments, and other (encompassing all remaining humorous items). Along with the units examined, the researchers divide the units into types of humor used in the classroom: nonsexual hostile, sexual nonhostile, sexual hostile, and nonsense. These researchers further delineate the targets or “victims” of humor as self, student, or other. Bryant, Comisky, Crane, and Zillman (1980) incorporate Freud’s work into their studies by discussing the classification procedure used by most scholars. Humor is categorized as either tendentious (biased) or harmless (nonsense). Within the tendentious category, humor is either hostile, sexual, or hostile and sexual.

Humor can be used in many different contexts, but is always situational (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992). According to Cohen (1977), the three laughing situations are (1) to be laughed at (usually an unpleasant or fearful experience); (2) to make others laugh (a fun, personally rewarding situation); and (3) to be able to laugh at oneself (considered by many to be an admirable quality). Depending on which of the three laughing situations occurs in the classroom, humor can be a negative or positive influence.

Guidelines for Using Humor in the Classroom

Humor can be a liberating force, or it can be a destroying one. Some guidelines to ensure that humor has a positive effect may include: beginning class with an amusing thought or joke; the use of humorous stories and anecdotes; relating student-oriented activities that often contain comic material; and taking “commercial breaks” (O’Donnell-Trujillo & Adams, 1983). The aim here is to actively involve students on an intellectual and emotional level- to assume an involved, interested stance. Stat (1988)

writes, "To involve your audience emotionally, you must create a drama-comedy (humor) is often the best tool to use." There are situations in which humor can prove counterproductive. If used at the wrong time, it has the ability to cause distraction. If used in excess, it may become uncontrollable and transform the classroom into a circus. If used inappropriately, it may potentially damage self-esteem, feelings, or cause embarrassment (Bariaud, 1988). Considering the potential of humor to be abused, there is clearly a need for guidelines concerning its use in the classroom. Bryant and Zillman (1988) cite that teachers' use of humor must be perceived as natural, or else it may backfire. Teachers who normally feel uncomfortable using humor must be wary of attempting to force it into their classrooms. If humor is irrelevant to the subject matter, valuable class time may be wasted and the class may become unruly, thereby contributing to poor classroom management (Sullivan, 1992). Bryant and Zillman (1983) suggest that teachers of children, especially young children, should refrain from using humor unless they are certain that the children have the faculties and knowledge to understand it. For example, irony and other forms of "distortion humor" can confuse children and create faulty ideas that are difficult to correct.

The basic component of some humor is ridicule. Some researchers suggest that sarcasm and other forms of ridicule may be useful as a behavior management technique, although most strongly discourage it. Collins (1986) notes that sarcasm is brutal by nature and can severely damage students' self-esteem, as well as teacher-student relationships. Bryant and Zillman (1988) suggest that although sarcasm and ridicule may serve a corrective function, the long-term consequence of diminished esteem in the eyes of students may make the immediate gains in terms of behavioral correction not worth the costs.

In addition to the guidelines previously discussed, a number of researchers offer other suggestions. Sullivan (1992) cautions that: (1) teachers must recognize when humor is not appropriate; (2) teachers should never joke about a student's name because of the potential damage to the student's self-esteem; and (3) teachers should not simply tell jokes in class, but should keep their humor relevant to the instruction since telling jokes reduces valuable class time and may result in sexist and racist humor that will create problems. The use of non-relevant humor, or that which is not at all related to the subject matter at hand, is shown to be an especially effective aid in information acquisition for younger children, those of preschool to early primary school age (Zillman & Bryant, 1983). The effectiveness of non-relevant humor diminishes with age so that by adulthood, non-relevant humor is not only not acceptable, but can even hinder the acquisition of information. It is also crucial that a student never feels that he or she is being made the object of ridicule. Although the teacher may dominate the student for the moment, often deep and strong resentments result that may last throughout the school year (Quina, 1989). Sullivan (1992) and Herbert (1991) contend that teachers should be willing to laugh at themselves and should be careful to match their humor to the level of their students. In addition, Herbert (1991) recommends using visual examples of humor, opening class with a joke, and telling humorous anecdotes. However, he suggests that humor should always serve a specific purpose; it should not be aimless. Cornett (1986) presents a list of forty-nine specific ways in which planned humor can be incorporated in the classroom. Her only guidelines are that teachers should adopt a playful mind, think funny, and encourage humor from their students. Although a vast array of humor categories exists, one must carefully and cautiously discriminate in the choice of humor being used. Clearly, the misuse or abuse of humor in the classroom may have negative effects.

Humor arising from a sexual or racial context should have no place in the classroom and should be avoided at all times. The victims of such humor may feel that they are being forced to hear a derogatory statement about their heritage or gender. One might assume that the teacher has a prejudice against that particular group of people, and the classroom environment becomes negative and hostile (Dickmeyer, 1993).

Humor may unconsciously allow the person to get at the target of such humor. The “target” is the individual who is placed in one of these situations by humor (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992). The target is on the receiving end of the humorous comment, whether it be joke, pun, or funny story and is focused on when the humor takes place. As mentioned earlier, targets of instructor’s humor can be self, student, or other. Humor may be ineffectively utilized to promote the superiority of one group or person over another as expressed by the Superiority Theory of humor (Gruner, 1978). This theory focuses upon the heightened sense of self-esteem, confidence, and reduced threat that are coupled with a humorous response to a typically stressful experience or situation (Martin & Lefcourt, 1988). It is embodied in the slur, the put down, and the barb in which an individual or group laughs at another, supposedly inferior individual or group (Pollio, 1983). Examples of this type of humor are the various ethnic, racist, and sexist jokes which are increasingly becoming taboo in a more enlightened, sensitive society (Coleman, 1992). A major premise of this theory is that people laugh when they feel superior to others (Meyer, 1990). Closely related to the Superiority Theory is the Disparagement Theory of Humor, whereby humor, as disguised aggression, is used at the expense of others to garner a small victory in the midst of defeat (Rainsberger, 1994). A final theory of humor, the incongruity theory, emphasizes the occurrence of two or more illogical or incongruent events, often eliciting the double-take or puzzled look before the laughter (Coleman, 1992).

For most, the process of attending school and becoming educated is seen as a very serious endeavor. Today, with grave concerns about the quality of the United States educational system relative to those in Japan, Germany, and other industrialized nations, the schoolhouse, from kindergarten to the doctoral level, is the target of much political posturing and media attention in this era of educational reform and restructuring. Despite this somber air, a lighter touch, in the form of appropriately utilized humor, may aid the instructional process (Coleman, 1992).

Humor is a vital component of today's society. This is evident throughout history by having its place among affluent persons from respected presidents in the political arena, portraying messages to the common people; revered clergy, bringing the word of God to congregations in desperate need of understanding interpretations relevant to life today; and an integral part of communication in the family, the basic foundation of social existence.

Chapter 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The Research Population

Sixty-five subjects enrolled in the Coordinated and Thematic Science 10 classes, comprised of 39 males and 26 females; 59 Caucasian, 4 African-American, and 2 other minorities (Foreign Exchange Students), were included in this study.

The Research Setting

Robert C. Byrd High School is a newly constructed facility located in Clarksburg, West Virginia on Route 98. The school is nestled in a valley surrounded by wooded acreage. The only dwellings in close proximity are two private residence homes located on the access road to the facility.

The Research Design

This study was designed to seek to identify the effects of humor in the classroom on Robert C. Byrd High School students. This sample was drawn from the sophomore class. A survey which was an adapted version of Martin and Lefcourt's Coping Humor Scale was administered on January 23, 1997, in Coordinated and Thematic Science 10 classes to all sophomore students enrolled in the Coordinated and Thematic Science 10 class. Questions were related to the effects of humor on reducing students' stress and tension in the school environment. The results were based on the frequency with which students strongly agreed that humor was effective in reducing school-related stress and tension.

The survey contained ten statements to be read and responded to by the subjects circling the appropriate response. Responses were in the form of the numbers one through

five, with one being strongly disagree, two mildly disagree, three not sure, four strongly agree, and 5 strongly agree. Each participant received a copy of the survey which was read to them. This was to ensure that all students understood each statement, and prevented the exclusion of any student with poor reading skills. In all cases, each subject responded to each statement. This consisted of circling the number one through five which described their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement. The survey and choice of responses were identical for each subject.

The number of responses chosen by the subjects for each item were combined to arrive at an overall number. Once these were compiled in table format, a percentage for combined selection of each response for each question was calculated. To determine the percentage of responses, the number of subjects was multiplied by 10 (number of items on the survey). This was called variable P. Next, the total number of times each response was selected was calculated, variable T. This number was then multiplied by 100 to yield the percentage of response from the total number of responses. Therefore:

$$T/P \times 100 = \% \text{ of response}$$

Response #1 was selected a total of 17 times from a possible 650 times. Therefore, $17/650 \times 100 = 2.6$ percent. Two percent of the responses were #1, or strongly disagree.

A letter requesting permission to conduct the survey was sent to the County Superintendent. After permission was granted, permission was sought from the high school principal. When the survey was completed, each class survey was collected and placed in the appropriate folder for each period. The folder helped to maintain the confidentiality of each subject's responses. After all data were calculated and compiled, the figures were compared and analyzed and conclusions were drawn.

Chapter 4

DATA ANALYSIS

Once all data were collected, the percentages of students who selected each response were compared. The primary interest was in the percentage of students who reported that humor was an effective coping mechanism for reducing stress and tension. Since the response choices were separated along lines of agreement and disagreement of statements, comparisons were made between those two categories. The #1 strongly disagree and #5 strongly agree responses were most relevant to the following research questions:

1. Does humor reduce stress and tension in the classroom?
2. Does humor foster a more positive environment?
3. Is the student/teacher relationship enhanced by a degree of humor in the classroom?
4. What are the negative forms of humor that should not be incorporated into the classroom?
5. Can humor improve attention and facilitate learning and retention?

When the differences between these two were not large enough to draw conclusions, the #1 and #2 (disagree responses) were looked at together as were the #4 and #5 (agree responses). The greater percentage of #5 responses (strongly agree) would represent the positive effects of humor in reducing stress and tension. The higher percentage of #1 (strongly disagree) would represent the ineffectiveness of humor as a coping mechanism. The percentages of these responses were compared for each of the ten items.

Analysis of Results

The results obtained from the study lend support to the research questions. It was predicted that humor in the classroom reduces stress and tension of the students thereby

fostering a positive classroom environment. Analysis of results for the students will be presented and discussed (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Number of Students who Selected Each Response

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	0	0	0	10	1	1	3	1	0	1	17
2	0	3	1	16	2	3	7	5	1	0	38
3	3	3	1	14	4	4	4	0	6	4	43
4	23	17	21	13	25	26	10	13	21	12	181
5	39	42	42	12	33	31	41	46	37	48	371

Table 2: Percentage of Students who Selected Each Response

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	0%	0%	0%	15%	2%	2%	5%	2%	0%	2%	3%
2	0%	5%	2%	25%	3%	5%	11%	8%	2%	0%	6%
3	5%	5%	2%	22%	6%	6%	6%	0%	9%	6%	7%
4	35%	26%	32%	20%	38%	40%	15%	20%	32%	18%	28%
5	60%	64%	64%	18%	51%	47%	63%	70%	57%	74%	56%

Table 1 contains the number of students, from the total of 65, who selected each response for each of the 10 items. The statements' numbers are located at the top of the table with the 5 response numbers running down along the left-hand side. The last column to the right is a total column showing the sum of each response for all 10 items. Table 2 is set up in the same manner, yet contains the percentages of responses for each item rather than the number for students. Table 2 contains the percentage of students selecting each response.

Statement 1: “The use of humor in the classroom by the teacher helps to relieve tension and stress oftentimes associated with school.”

Sixty percent of students selected the strongly agree response while none selected the strongly disagree response. The strongly agree response represented the largest percentage of responses to statement number one. This 60% represents over half of the students strongly agreeing that humor used by the classroom teacher helps to relieve school-related tension and stress. An additional 35% selected mildly agree, yielding a total of 95% in agreement of the stress-reducing effects of classroom humor.

Statement 2: “I feel more at ease to participate in a class where the environment possesses a certain degree of humor.”

Once again, a large contrast existed between the strongly agree and the strongly disagree responses. Over half the students selected the strongly agree response as compared to the strongly disagree response, with percentages of 65 and 0 respectively. This means that over half of the students feel more at ease to participate in a class characterized by a certain degree of humor. The results become more convincing when adding the mildly agree 26% response rate.

Statement 3: “A teacher who uses humor in the classroom is approachable.”

Students responded in a manner that was identical to statement number two. Sixty-five percent of the students selected the strongly agree response whereas none selected the strongly disagree response. Over half the students feel that a teacher who uses humor in the classroom is approachable.

Statement 4: “Sarcasm is inappropriate in the classroom and should not be used.”

The responses selected by the students for this statement were too close to draw a conclusion based on this item. Fifteen percent of students strongly disagreed with the

inappropriateness of sarcasm in the classroom, whereas 18% strongly agreed that sarcasm is inappropriate for classroom use. Comparison of combined strongly agree and mildly agree responses with strongly disagree and mildly disagree responses, 38% and 40% respectively, yielded a difference still too small to draw any conclusions. This closeness of the selected responses may have been a result of ambiguity of the statement, students' perceptions of sarcasm, and its intentions.

Statement 5: "The teacher/student relationship is enhanced by a degree of humor in the classroom."

Only 1.5% of the students selected the strongly disagree response, whereas over half, 51%, of students chose the strongly agree response for this statement. Just over half the students feel that classroom humor enhances the teacher/student relationship. This leaves a small number of students who view humor in the classroom as either having a dissimilar effect or no effect at all on teacher/student relationship.

Statement 6: "Humor can sometimes help me to learn and retain more difficult material in a subject."

Forty-eight percent of the students chose strongly agree (#5) response indicating that nearly one-half of students felt that humor could be instrumental in learning and retention of more difficult subject matter. Only 1.5% of the respondents believed it to be ineffective in learning or retention of more difficult material in a subject. This was indicated by only 1.5% of the students choosing a strongly disagree (#1) response.

Statement 7: "Humor should never be used to embarrass or ridicule a student."

Sixty-three percent of the students surveyed chose strongly agree (#5) response that humor should never be a tool to ridicule a student whereas 4.6% responded with strongly disagree (#1) choice. This suggests that some students, though even a slight number, do find it appropriate to use humor to ridicule another student.

Statement 8: “Humor helps to hold my attention and keeps the class interesting.”

Seventy-one percent of the students responded with the strongly agree (#5) response whereas 0% chose the strongly disagree (#1) response. This indicates that the students perceived humor as helpful in keeping their attention. One can interpret that humor adds to the interest level of the student.

Statement 9: “The use of humor helps to foster a positive classroom environment.”

Fifty-seven percent of students responding selected the strongly agree response (#5) whereas 0% selected the strongly disagree (#1) response. This indicates that the students perceived humor as a factor aiding in a positive classroom environment.

Statement 10: “I look forward to attending a class in which the teacher uses humor as a tool to make the class more enjoyable.”

Almost two-thirds of the students selected the strongly agree (#5) response whereas only 1.5% chose the strongly disagree (#1) response. This suggests that students prefer attending a class in which the teacher uses humor as a mechanism to make the classroom environment more comfortable for the students.

Statements #1 and #9 have the greatest implication for this study and seem to provide the strongest support for the hypothesis. Statement #1 directly questioned the effects of classroom humor on students’ stress and tension. Statement #9 examined the effect of humor on fostering a positive classroom environment. No students selected the strongly disagree (#5) response for either statement. This lends support to the positive effects of humor in the classroom both on student tension and stress as well as the classroom environment. Therefore, as stated in the hypothesis, humor in the classroom is effective in reducing stress and tension and fostering a positive a classroom environment.

Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A Concluding Remark

A survey was used to test the hypothesis that humor in the classroom is effective in reducing stress and tension as well as fostering a positive classroom environment. The ten items of the survey assessed students' agreement or disagreement with statements concerning humor's use and effectiveness in coping with classroom related stress and tension as well as establishing a positive classroom environment. The premise behind this procedure was that the greatest percentage of subjects who responded with the #5 (strongly agree) response, the greater support for the research questions. The greater percentage of responses did fall in this category. Students reported agreeing with statements concerning humor's coping ability and its ability to foster a positive classroom environment at a greater rate than disagreeing with such statements. Twice as many students agreed with such statements rather than disagreed, indicating the positive effects of humor on stress and tension and the classroom environment. Such results help one to conclude that if such a large percentage of students report the positive effects of humor on stress and tension and the classroom environment, it must be an effective coping mechanism.

In today's society of rigorous demands, deadlines, and rules, contributing to competitive lifestyles, one is faced with a considerable increased amount of stress. At times, it seems that one has no escape from the array of stressors. Learning is difficult to accomplish successfully in the best of circumstances, but a comfortable and positive surrounding may serve to facilitate this endeavor. Since the classroom is a learning environment, it is extremely important to diminish stress and tension, at least to a

comfortable level. It would seem to be a fruitless effort to even attempt to teach without first reducing some of the students' stress.

The aim of this study was to explore the use of humor to reduce stress and tension and to foster a more positive environment in which learning could be enhanced. There exists a large body of research documenting the psychological as well as the physiological benefits of humor as a stress reducer. This study aimed to extend these principles to apply to the classroom setting. As previously stated, an adapted version of Martin and Lefcourt's (1983) Coping Humor Scale was administered to 65 sophomore high school students.

My analysis showed that the majority of subjects agreed with the items dealing with the use of humor in tense school situations as a means of coping. One may conclude from the results of the study that well over 50% of all subjects agreed with the effectiveness of humor as both a stress and tension reducer. Similarly, research indicated that humor was an effective tool in fostering a positive classroom climate. Several statements were aimed at factors contributing to a positive classroom environment such as approachability of the teacher and teacher/student rapport.

If the classroom becomes a tense, negative environment, students will have difficulty learning. When these young adults have so many sources of stress weighing on their minds, the definition of a noun or the square root of 100 are more than likely the farthest things from their minds. It seems so easy for the students to get so caught up in the stress of grades, homework assignments, peer pressure, and family problems that school becomes a negative place and experience. Therefore, one of the educators main priorities should be transforming the situation and creating a positive learning environment.

Several factors that may have impacted this study need to be addressed. The issue of gender may have influenced the respondents to answer the survey questions in a certain manner, even though it was not examined in the study. The home or family environment

of the students may have played a role in the way humor was perceived by the individual students. For example, in some family situations, humor may have been an integral part of daily life, whereas in others, humor may have been completely nonexistent. In the environment in which humor was integral, these students may have perceived humor in a more positive manner, being useful in a stressful situation, including the classroom; whereas in an environment in which humor was rarely used, one may have perceived it as ineffective and inappropriate as a coping mechanism both in and outside the classroom. Another aspect to be considered is the purpose and extent to which humor was used. If students had used humor inappropriately in previous situations, for example, the use of ridicule and sarcasm, this could have influenced their perception of humor on the survey.

A recommendation for further research would be an investigation of the applicability of the stress reducing effect of humor to situations beyond the classroom environment. One such area that could be examined to some extent would be the physiological aspect and the effect of humor on reducing stress and tension. With the increased number of deaths due to heart attack and stroke, stress being a major contributor, humor may be a factor useful in creating a decline in this rate. Another recommendation to be considered is that educators should model the utilization of appropriate forms of humor. This practice equips students with the vital tools to survive in an extremely stressful society.

When used appropriately, the potential benefits of humor are endless. Based upon the findings of this study, the researcher suggests that educators consider the use of humor as a mechanism for reducing stress and tension and creating a more positive learning environment.

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APPENDIX A: Letter of Permission for Survey
and
Authorization to Conduct Survey

Approved
(Signature)
5/28/97

May 27, 1997

Mr. Leon Pilewski, Principal
Robert C. Byrd H.S.
Clarksburg, W.Va. 26301

*Best wishes
on your work
(Signature)*

Mr. Pilewski:

The intent of this letter is to request permission to administer a survey for the purpose of completing my thesis for the Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction. The survey would be administered to the sophomore students enrolled in my classes at Robert C. Byrd High School. The survey is relevant to the use of humor as a tool in the classroom.

I am attempting to research the impact of humor, when utilized effectively, to reduce stress and anxiety in the classroom as well as to create a zone in which the students can feel comfortable and thus make the classroom more conducive to learning.

The survey is a brief questionnaire to which students will respond honestly and clearly. The results will then be tabulated and utilized accordingly. The survey would be administered on the day before exams so that no instructional time is lost and would only take a fraction of time to complete.

Once the research is completed, I would be more than willing to share the results with you. I would appreciate attention to this request at your earliest convenience. Your consideration of my request is greatly appreciated. I realize that your work deals with matters of much more urgency and know how valuable your time is, but I ask this so that I may complete this study and compile my results to fulfill my requirements for my thesis.

Respectfully,

(Signature)

Karen E. Steele

HUMOR SURVEY

FEMALE: _____ (PLEASE ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS HONESTLY)

MALE: _____

PLEASE MARK YOUR SURVEY QUESTIONS BY CIRCLING THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE NUMBER:

1- STRONGLY DISAGREE

2- MILDLY DISAGREE

3- NOT SURE

4- MILDLY AGREE

5- STRONGLY AGREE

1. The use of humor in the classroom by the teacher helps to relieve tension and stress oftentimes associated with school.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I feel more at ease to participate in a class where the environment possesses a certain degree of humor.

1 2 3 4 5

3. A teacher who uses humor in the classroom is approachable.

1 2 3 4 5

4. Sarcasm is inappropriate in the classroom and should not be used.

1 2 3 4 5

5. The teacher/student relationship is enhanced by a degree of humor in the classroom.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Humor can sometimes help me to learn and retain more difficult material in a subject.

1 2 3 4 5

7. Humor should never be used to embarrass or ridicule a student.

1 2 3 4 5

8. Humor helps to hold my attention and keeps the class interesting.

1 2 3 4 5

9. The use of humor helps to foster a positive classroom environment.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I look forward to attending a class in which the teacher uses humor as a tool to make the class more comfortable.

1 2 3 4 5



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Organization/Address:		Telephone: <i>(304) 842-6934</i>	FAX:
		E-Mail Address:	Date: <i>6-17-98</i>