

LAUGHTER TO LEARNING: HOW HUMOR CAN BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND INCREASE LEARNING IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that students perceive their success, in even the most difficult courses, on their interactions and relationships with their instructors (Anderson, 2011; Micari & Pazos, 2012). In the online classroom, instructors run into an even greater challenge when it comes to engaging students, showing their personalities, and being present. One way of making connections with online college students is through humor. Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial, and Solomon (2011) found that students not only expressed favorable comments about their professors who used humor in the classroom, they also showed higher success rates and levels of engagement. Davies (2015) also discovered that student comprehension of material delivered with wit was increased over students whose instructors did not use humor. This article will provide research behind using humor, examples of appropriate and effective means of demonstrating humor in the online classroom, and samples of student comments when humor was used. Even the most humor-challenged faculty members will learn strategies to add elements of their own wittiness to their online classes.

Key words: humor, online classes, student engagement, increased achievement

Have you heard the joke about the online instructor? It is virtually impossible to forget! Humor in the classroom is not a new thing. In the traditional classroom setting, instructors can use planned or spontaneous jokes or they can share stories to bring humor to the learning environment. In the online environment, it is not as easy to do without taking the time to plan for it. This article includes research behind the use of humor, illustrates examples of appropriate and effective means of demonstrating humor in the online classroom, and uncovers student perceptions of instructor use of humor in the online classroom. Even the most humor-challenged faculty members

will identify strategies to add elements of their own virtual comedy into their online classes.

WHAT IS HUMOR IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM?

Humor in the online classroom is a way to make the environment a little more lighthearted. Humor can help to create a comfortable learning environment for students and can also create mutual respect and openness between the instructor and the students and among students. There is a shared belief amongst both teachers and students that learning should be fun (Shatz & LoSchiavo, 2006). Humor also has the ability to help with the actual lesson delivery. By promoting objectives

and increasing student interest and attention, humor can effectively promote learning (Shatz & LoSchiavo, 2006). While humor is great for getting the lesson started and for maintaining the students' attention throughout, it should not be used as the only instructional method.

WHY IS HUMOR IMPORTANT?

Humor is important because it has many physiological and psychological benefits. While humor can help students understand concepts and lesson content, it can also capture and maintain attention and motivation, which helps students to mentally engage with the course material (Shatz & Coil, 2008). As a teaching strategy, humor is an "educational lubricant that can make learning more engaging, enjoyable, and memorable" (Shatz & Coil, 2008, p. 106). The use of humor in the online classroom can appeal to the more technology-savvy population. The National Education Association ran an article by McNeely (n.d.) that found that humor can stimulate brain activity and increase creativity. The use of humor has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety and lower the affective filter (Ivy, 2013).

Building relationships with students should be a goal of every instructor. According to James (2004), "Humor is a characteristic of the best and most effective teachers" (p. 94). The use of humor helps to change student perceptions of the instructor and makes the instructor more approachable (Eskey, 2010). Micari and Pazos (2012) determined that the difference between students' perceptions of their class being "unreasonably hard" and being "a great learning experience" was their relationship with the instructor. Humor builds those relationships.

Not only does humor aid in building relationships between the students and the instructor, it also helps with building relationships among the students. Anderson (2011) found that humor helped to increase group cohesion and student connectedness. Students, especially online students, tend to dread the "group work" that many online classes include, so any way to help build relationships between students will be beneficial.

HOW DO YOU DO IT? PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTING HUMOR

As with any instructional method, the important thing to remember is to do what is comfortable for

you and for your students. Since instructors are not comedians, there is really no expectation from the students, but rather they show gratitude for even the simplest use of humor. In addition to making sure that you are comfortable with the use of humor, it is important to make sure that it fits into the course and the environment.

Humor can be added in the online classroom through the use of jokes, cartoons, memes, riddles, quotes, or anything else that feels comfortable to the instructor, is appropriate for the audience, and is content-based to enhance and not take away from a lesson. When introducing difficult topics, humor can help to lighten the intensity and keep the students engaged. When answering questions and when grading are also great times to use humor. Adding some positive humor to a grade can be equivalent to adding a sticker to a student's paper.

Humor can be a valuable tool in enhancing classroom content and developing rapport. However, humor should never be at the expense of a student. Instructors should refrain from engaging in humor that adversely impacts the classroom climate and the rapport among students and the instructor. This would include, but is not limited to, disparaging references to gender, race, religion, and ability (Shibinski & Martin, 2010).

GETTING STARTED

There are web sites designed to allow anyone to take a humorous photo and add text to it that could become personalized to the content of the course. These are commonly called memes and these web sites are designed to help add humor: www.memegenerator.com, <http://makeameme.org>, <http://www.memes.com/generator>, and <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>. A simple Google search will yield ready-made memes and images that are content-based. As with anything on the Internet, be sure to check for the appropriateness of the image or joke being used. It is much better to err on the side of caution to ensure that no one is offended by the image or joke.

If you are an instructor who is teaching future teachers, the use of humor can be even more helpful in helping the students to prepare for their own personal use of humor in their classrooms. An example of this could be in the designing of classroom rules. The use of humorous images can be helpful in remembering the rules while also

keeping the students engaged in the process.

WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK?

Students have provided several unsolicited comments about the use of humor in our classes. In recent months, students have sent each of us observations about how the use of humor has helped them in class and helped them feel a part of the online learning community. It is easy to feel lost and invisible behind a computer screen and keyboard, but adding humor helped these students feel connected in a meaningful way, which in turn enhanced their success in the online classroom. In personal messages to each of the instructors, in class forums, and in the End of Course Surveys, the following students sent these comments:

Your great sense of humor and the fact that you shared some laughs with us is greatly appreciated. You try hard to connect with your students and to make a positive experience out of this journey. Thank you. (Student S., personal communication in the discussion forum, March 4, 2017).

[Instructor Name], you were definitely a great help during this first course. I appreciate your humor because it helped to make the online experience more comfortable. ... I genuinely appreciate it all (Student N., personal communication in the discussion forum, March 5, 2017).

It has been so great having you as my instructor for my very first college class. I would like to take the time to thank you for doing such a wonderful job. Anyone should be able to tell that teaching is your calling, just by reading over some of our assignments. You know how to make learning fun and not so dull and boring all of the time. Once again thank you for being an excellent instructor (Student A, personal

communication, January 9, 2017).

My instructor has been responding quickly to my questions, and is down to earth, posting comical memes which also gives me a sense of welcome, as we are all in this together (Student B, personal communication, December 5, 2016).

Thank you for the most informative and educational first seven weeks for me. I learned a lot of insightful information I will need and definitely use in my future courses and hopefully even teach my future students. You were amazing and your version of the curriculum was creative, supportive, and life changing. I enjoyed your class dearly and I will miss your teacher humor after completing your grading (Student C, personal communication, November 14, 2016).

The instructor was encouraging and understanding. She also allowed us to see her humor. Yes indeed she was wonderful (Anonymous comment on End of Course Survey, September 2016).

CONCLUSION

Humor in the classroom is something that research has shown to increase attention and focus while also helping to bridge the gap in distance learning and build important relationships between instructors and students. This article shared the benefits of using humor and applying it to the online classroom. Student testimonials of their experience of humor in the courses showed that it helped them feel connected to the instructor and improved their learning. Even the simplest addition of humor can help students laugh their way to learning.

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