

“EVERYONE’S A COMEDIAN.” NO REALLY, THEY ARE: USING HUMOR IN THE ONLINE AND TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

Victoria D. Smith, Grand Canyon University
Amy Wortley, Grand Canyon University

ABSTRACT

The effects of the incorporation of instructor humor in both the traditional and online classroom settings was examined. Students react to instructor humor in positive ways that demonstrate both increased engagement with the material and increased information recall following the use of instructor humor in lecture. Challenges of instructor and student relationship and connection within the classroom could be mitigated in part through the use of humor. Despite its challenges, instructors should incorporate humor in the classroom. The ability to project one’s personality and connect with students in the classroom is a key element in the effectiveness of humor as it relates to student engagement. In order to fully benefit from the incorporation of humor, instructors should play to their own strengths and talents in the delivery of humorous material in the classroom, both traditional and virtual.

Keywords: instructor humor, online classroom, traditional classroom, practical applications, projecting personality in instruction

INTRODUCTION

Nasiri and Mafakheri (2015) write, “Until the 19th century, it was commonly believed that humor did not belong in the classroom, and that teaching was a solemn profession dealing only with serious issues. Nowadays, humor in teaching is regarded as an active learning strategy” (p. 27). Even today many students walk into a classroom or log into an online course on the first day with dread, expecting the class to be dull, which makes the instructor’s job even more challenging, and arguably in more need of the implementation of humorous material to enhance the experience for the students. Instructors of all modalities, traditional, online, and blended, face challenges in how to incorporate humor and what types are appropriate in the classroom; additionally, many instructors do not feel they have the personality to use humor successfully. Despite its challenges, instructors should use humor. The ability to effectively project

one’s personality and connect with students in the classroom is a key part of humor usage as it relates to student engagement. Transparency in teaching as well as playing to individual instructor strengths and talents is essential to effective humor usage in the classroom.

Many instructors would like to use humor in their classrooms, but often shy away from it because they mistakenly believe they must have a particular skills set or personality type in order to do it successfully. Nasiri and Mafakheri (2015) assert:

The big difference between humor in comedy and humor in teaching is that the latter is not usually original humor. Teachers widely collect and use humorous material created elsewhere. That is why the use of humor in lecturing involves learnable skills, while humor in comedy

needs a natural sense and ability. (p. 29)

Even though Nasiri and Mafakheri are correct that instructors do often bring in humorous material created by others into the classroom, the delivery of said material still makes a difference. If an instructor delivers material in a way that is inauthentic to his or her personality, students will know, and will not find the humor funny. Because of this, instructors can and need to be encouraged to integrate their own personalities into the humorous material when incorporating it in the classroom. That can entail more subtle humor such as an eyebrow raise, voice inflection, or gesture, or a more animated, boisterous type of humor that may involve moving around the room at a quick pace and laughing loudly.

BENEFITS OF HUMOR USAGE

Many education programs now tell potential instructors teaching is a performance art, and scholars such as Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin (2010) contended appropriate instructional humor usage in the classroom not only engages an audience, but is directly connected to student learning and achievement. Merolla (2006) asserts, “Generally speaking, humor can positively impact people’s lives [...] studies have linked humor to low stress levels, high self-esteem, empathy, and interpersonal attractiveness” (176). Personalized instruction incorporating humor encourages student engagement and results in increased information retention. Merolla (2006) explains this connection as “arousal framed explanations” to further elaborate and clarify on the relationship between humor and recall (175). Torok, McMorris, and Lin (2004) found 74% of college students surveyed indicate they appreciated the use of humor by their instructors (p. 16). Additionally, 40% of those surveyed acknowledge humor “often” facilitates their learning in the classroom, and 40% of students responded that humor “always” helps them be successful in their learning (Torok, et. al., 2004, p. 16). Instructors’ usage of closely related content based humor is positively correlated with student learning. This type of humor should enhance student motivation and information processing in its approach (Wanzer, Frymier & Irwin, 2010). Segrist & Hupp (2015) put forward the idea “instructor’s use of humor is positively associated with students’ perceptions that the instructor has

a ‘positive attitude’ toward them, ‘wanted them to succeed’, and displayed a ‘genuine concern for them” (p. 14). The perception of humor remains an important component in the humor-memory relationship. The retrieval processes of memory encoding are positively influenced by humor; this effect can be observed in the Incongruity Resolution Hypothesis posited by Carlson (2011). The resolution of semantic incongruities associated with humor creates a memory advantage for the humorous material, resulting in advantaged recall and enduring memory for the material (Carlson, 2011). In the study, Carlson (2011) found it was not necessary for students to intentionally process humor in order for the humor effect to emerge. This may be encouraging to instructors in that students may not necessarily need to fully comprehend the humorous aspect of material for its benefits to be experienced.

CHALLENGES OF TRADITIONAL LEARNING

Though there are benefits of using humor, there are also challenges in including it in the classroom. One of those challenges is instructors who mistakenly believe they are not proficient at producing humor. However, while an individual instructor’s strengths may not lie in producing a particular type of humor, that does not necessarily imply they do not have skills in producing other styles of humor and should abandon bringing humor into the classroom altogether. In fact, instructors should feel encouraged to implement humor into their classrooms in appropriate ways that work best for them individually. If an instructor is not good at a particular type of humor, then it is best the instructor not use that style. For example, if one has a more reserved personality, an attempt at a louder, more energetic type of humor might not render as successful results as a more subtle attempt. In short, though ascertaining which type of humor works best for an instructor can be challenging, it can be worthwhile to overcome this difficulty in order to successfully connect with students.

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING

The online learning environment is a place of challenge and invention. More and more campuses are choosing to offer online classes to supplement more traditional modes of instruction. A survey of 400 students from 72 online classes revealed that of those students, more than 90 percent

would recommend online learning to their friends (Goldsmith, 2001). With the continual forward momentum of technology and the increased role of technology in the lives of our students, perhaps the high rate of student approval of online courses is not surprising; however, this new mode of information delivery presents a unique set of challenges to instructors. Some of those challenges include “fostering effective communication in a setting where paralinguistic cues such as facial expression and voice intonation are often absent” (Ice, Curise, Phillips & Wells, 2007; Lui, Lee, Bonk, Su & Magjuka, 2005, p. 5). In addition, while there is an appreciation for the flexibility and affordability of online learning modes, some still express concern regarding the quality, rigor, and acceptance of online based degrees by employers (Saad, Busted & Ogisi, 2013). In order to help alleviate concerns such as this and engage students in the online learning environment, instructors must adapt and differentiate their methods of information delivery. One of the methods proving successful in engaging students and effectively conveying academic material is the use of instructor humor.

There are many reasons humor can be powerful in the online environment, and the strengths instructor humor offers in many places complements and overcomes some of the specific challenges presented by the online learning mode. Students may express concern that online learning is an impersonal, sterile environment in which to learn; however, humor allows an online instructor to project personality and individuality while promoting connection and human relationships in the learning forums. While the use of appropriate instructor-based humor can be an effective method for increasing student engagement and information recall, inappropriate humor can have an equally powerful effect. Not all modes of humor are appropriate in the online classroom. Therefore, some level of caution should be implemented when utilizing humorous content in this setting, emphasizing the difference between appropriate and inappropriate comedic modes.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES IN THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

One challenge of using humor in the traditional classroom is the instructor is the facilitator of humor. If students make jokes mocking each other,

it is the instructor’s responsibility to mediate those situations. For example, during an instructor’s first semester teaching English Composition, a male student made a derogatory joke about female soccer students. While the instructor laughed it off, the female soccer student was clearly offended. The instructor realized her mistake was that she did not gently reprimand the male student for his offensive joke because research shows humor mocking student groups or affiliations is not considered funny by students (Wanzer, Frymier & Irwin, 2010). In short, it is best to encourage and simultaneously monitor humor usage by students and by the instructor.

If students expect the classroom to be dull, the educator’s job is even harder. Since the traditional classroom involves the physical presence of both instructors and students, the instructor takes on the role of performance artist who must be at least somewhat masterful at improvisation since each class, each semester, each class meeting, no matter how frequently one teaches the course, is organic. Instructors need to learn to expect the unexpected, so to speak, and like all performance artists, including, but not limited to, stand-up comedians, be prepared for heckling of sorts whether it is in the form of eye rolling, groaning, or “Easter Island faces” (the sea of blank stares with which arguably all instructors are familiar). However, when an instructor enters the classroom prepared, they can successfully implement humor.

Implementing humor often helps instructors establish a positive relationship with students that helps them retain course information. In fact, Linda L. Ivy (2013) asserts humor can “set up a less adversarial relationship between teacher and students” and “help improve the cognitive capabilities of both the teacher and the students,” (p. 40, 27). When instructors make jokes about a common enemy or source of frustration, such as inadequate campus parking, more than likely, students will chuckle (Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010). Similarly, when instructors joke about their own foibles, tricks, sneakiness, and procrastination as students, it can often relax the instructor/student dynamic while still allowing the instructor to maintain respect and authority. William B. Streaan (2008) writes, “We can make ourselves more human and accessible by sharing our stories with students, and we can encourage students to do the

same” (p. 77). These stories allow instructors to commiserate with students and share laughs, while still making course expectations clear.

Humor is only effective in terms of recall, however, if it is used in moderation, inspires students and motivates them to apply their knowledge throughout the course. In fact, excessive use of humor “can undermine a teacher’s credibility,” (Ivy, 2013, p. 42). Humor that does not distract from the course content and circles back to the current lesson renders successful results and student retention of knowledge where students perceive the instructor as a comedic beacon of knowledge whom they respect rather than the opening act of a stand-up comedy show. Adding levity to a course can also make students feel accepted and free to think in more creative ways and express themselves in more unconventional ways they may previously have thought to be taboo—for example, they might feel more comfortable using pop culture references with instructors they otherwise might have assumed fit the stereotype of the stodgy instructor.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

A common concern for instructors, particularly those teaching in the online environment is “what if I am not naturally funny?” Humor is subjective, and therefore, makes some individuals feel uncomfortable with its usage. However, even an attempt at humor usage is appreciated by students, according to recent surveys. James (2004) contends, “Student surveys on the characteristics of the more effective teachers routinely have placed humor as one of the top five traits” (p. 93). One way to help alleviate some of these concerns is to play to the instructor’s natural personality and strengths instead of following the inclination to “create” a persona in the classroom. Authenticity is key in student engagement and the creation of online classroom community. The instructor can create meaningful connections with their students by being genuine and exhibiting transparency in their teaching. Some instructors express concern that they are not “funny people”, but as with much of teaching, instructors can gather humorous materials to share with the class instead of feeling the burden to create the humor themselves. However, using humor in the online environment is not just a gathering and delivery of humorous material, but is instead a chance to relate to the

students by sharing personality through humor, even if one is not conventionally considered funny. The delivery of the material is key. If an instructor is able to emphasize their personality, the students will often engage with the honesty of the response.

If playing the comic in their virtual classroom is still an uncomfortable proposition, recent studies work to allay that concern by demonstrating the effectiveness of humor as showcased through videos shared in the online forum. By embedding links from sources, even those as common as YouTube, instructors can display the ability to connect and engage students with the course material in a humorous context. In fact, some research suggests content and humor oriented YouTube videos enhance student engagement, depth of understanding, and overall satisfaction in higher education courses (Buzetto-More, 2014). In this same study, “70.7% of participants surveyed ‘agreed/strongly agreed’ the use of YouTube as a learning tool engages students” (2014, p. 26). The incorporation of instructional humor through video links embedded in discussions can prove highly effective for educators who wish to integrate comedy in the online classroom.

Another concern expressed is communicating humor online simply is a more time-intensive approach: that being humorous just takes more effort than being utilitarian. Humor online must, necessarily, be more crafted than the spontaneous, improvisational mode of traditional classrooms. This idea is further endorsed by Goldsmith who asserts, “By necessity, online humor is a unique kind of humor, one that is much more linguistically oriented [...] the teacher’s ability to be present, to project a personality through cyberspace, and to demonstrate a sense of humor are additional factors that help bring students fully into their virtual classroom” (Goldsmith, 2001, p. 5). This form of humor, like much of teaching, is one that can only be strengthened through practice and application. Starting small in the incorporation of humorous content and slowly adding more to the course platform is a valid method of increasing student engagement and instructor confidence in humor usage. Some suggested methods for this gradual incorporation of humor in the class involve written comments and email communication with the students. Crafting a message with a more humorous tone means “going back through and

editing it so it reads more casually and hopefully more “funny” (James, 2004, p. 93). This kind of communication is more intentionally constructed, so it does take some more time, but the reward in student connection and engagement is notable.

CONCLUSION

In both its traditional and online forms, classrooms benefit from the incorporation of instructor humor. Students experience a higher level of engagement with course content and an increased ability to recall class related materials at later dates. When humor is appropriate and delivered as a part of the instructor’s natural personality, students are able to create more powerful connections with the material and the instructor themselves. As education continues to evolve in both the online environment and in the more traditional setting, the use of humor should be endorsed and incorporated in the classroom.

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