

## Considerations for Using Humour in Your Teaching



### Introduction

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The topic of humour in education has been around for centuries and research on the topic has been conducted for decades. Today a large body of research exists on its potential benefits and potential pitfalls.

Before we move into the benefits and potential pitfalls of deciding on using humour in your classroom let me first mention two very important starting points:

**While** humour does indeed have some benefits, it is not essential to good teaching, nor even to having good classroom environment. Just to be fully transparent here, even those researchers who report positive effects of humour in classrooms do not suggest that humour is the game breaker....the effect sizes are small, if any at all...and humour should not be viewed as **that** essential element you must add to your good teaching.

Still, in this webinar I'd like to suggest to you that humour in your classroom does have some wonderful benefits that can assist in developing a productive learning environment.

**Also**, let's establish a working definitions here.

In this webinar I am referring to what's known as humorous attempts...that is, when a teacher deliberately plans on using humour in their classroom. I'm not saying it IS funny or humorous, but it was a humorous attempt. Any of you purveyors of dad jokes know exactly what I'm talking about... an attempt to be humorous. This is also different from incidental or spontaneous humour that's unplanned and is often reactionary. I will touch on that a bit too, but I'm primarily concerned with the act of inserting humorous attempts into your teaching.

We're talking here about stories, puns, illustrations, cartoons, jokes, riddles, gestures, facial expressions, impersonations, word play, props, and so on.

### So, what are some of the benefits and potential pitfalls of using humour in the classroom?

**1** Research has shown that teachers who engage in humour tend to be more approachable...and perceived by students as more approachable outside of class. And, as counter-intuitive as this may seem, students were more likely to discuss their serious needs and their problems with those teachers. Why? Because they were perceived as more approachable. Humor can convey warmth, closeness, and positivity. Human beings seem to like to be around people who make them laugh and are easy to be around. Indeed, humour along with honesty have often been ranked as the two most important attributes people look for in a potential partner.



## 1. Approachable & Listened to

Warmth, ease of being around positive, more enjoyable, Influential

Psychologically we know that humour contributes to individuals higher subjective wellbeing. I recently read a statement that said, "Positive humour leads to positive health".

When humor is used appropriately and is relevant, students reported higher positive evaluation and support for the teacher. Now, the flip side of that statement is, of course, when teachers' humour was not appropriate, or was irrelevant, distracting, and involved put down or insults, made fun of others, or was used too often, the reported evaluation and support for those teachers was low.

And a cautionary note here too to those of you who have what's been identified as a *High Humorous Orientation*...these are people who are our humorous friends who have that amazing ability to be funny any moment of the day and tend to use a wider range or have a greater repertoire of humorous ideas and inclinations....You, my friend, need to be extra careful.

Researchers who study humour have found that these individuals are also more prone to engage in inappropriate humour, their intelligent quick wit can be reactionary and their use of satire, sarcasm and innuendos that can be misunderstood and inappropriate. So, be careful funny people!

And I'll add one thing here...although I hesitate somewhat of even mentioning this....and to be fair to the researchers, they too are cautious in mentioning this. The optimal number of humorous attempts—and this was reported in surveys done with hundreds of students over time—in a 50 minute class was between 4 and 5. Again, I hesitate even saying that because it should not be thought of as prescriptive or planned that way. The point the researchers were actually emphasizing is that there appears to be a 'sweet spot', if you will, of just the right amount of humorous attempts during a class period. Too much humour resulted in teachers not being taken seriously (i.e. class clowns) and the subject matter also not being taken seriously. We don't want that.

**2** Secondly, researchers report that the appropriate use of humour in the classroom contributes to building upon the positive learning environment that you are so diligently building. Punctuating your teaching with some humour can make the subject area curriculum more enjoyable and students like being in a class where the material provides emotional pleasure. Enhancing the learning environment with a little levity also provides tension relief and can even alleviate a bit of anxiety a student may be experiencing.

## 2. Helps add to a positive learning environment

An environment that's enjoyable, provides emotional pleasure and relief.

Relieves tension & anxiety



This has also been demonstrated on quizzes, exams and assignments. When the teacher utilizes humour in test questions and assignment descriptions, for example, there seems to be a positive emotional effect on students' engagement during the work. During exams students have relaxed a bit and their stress has been reduced, and some researchers suggest that the reduction in anxiety leads to better performance on test. Now, this research appears to be mostly anecdotal...but still, students have reported

that it made the assignment or exam a bit more bearable, which it can be hypothesized, freed up cognitive resources spent on worry and stress, and be applied to solving the assignment or test.

**3** Now, let's stay on environment for a moment. Not only is the social and emotional aspect of classroom environment enhanced and made more positive through an injection of humour, but also the cognitive aspects seem to benefit from humour.

How?

Okay, humour me for a moment as I explain the cognitive underpinnings of humour...humour causes a type of incongruence in the brain....in other words, your brain hears a joke, or a pun, or some form of word-play, or views a humorous depiction or something...and since it's not straightforward or the meaning is not immediately evident or explicit, the brain takes notice. It 'leans in' so to speak. The brain loves novelty. It pays attention to or awakens to this incongruence. Your brain also gains satisfaction in solving this incongruence.



So, researchers have posited that the use of humour serves to awaken the brain to pay attention, and humour can also hold attention. Humour can serve to alert the brain that something needs our concentration and we assign cognitive resources to what we see or hear.

A personal story here to illustrate. I used to teach in a maximum security youth prison. Many of my students said to me when they were first assigned to a classroom that they hated school. Now, as I've said in other places, students don't hate math, or writing, or English, or school for that matter....they hate how it makes them feel. I have witnessed dozens of times students

### 3. Gains attention & holds interest

Gaining and holding attention are necessary prerequisites to having students assign their cognitive resources to learning.

who normally would never engage in class material, and sit with their arms crossed at the back of the room, suddenly perk up when humour was injected into the class lesson...or assignment.

Can I give you an example?

One of my tasks as a teacher in this facility was to increase the reading ability, writing ability and math abilities of my students who had long left school and decided they would never return. Many of my students were teenagers who could barely read, write or use functional math in everyday life. If they were going to return to society....and hopefully formal schooling, how could I improve their academic abilities when they've just told me they hate school? How on earth, for example, was I going to motivate them to learn to write when most of them never wanted to pick up a pencil ever again.

It actually started with this very photo.



I saw a picture caption for this photo that read, *How to Tell if Your Ass is Too Small*. I laughed. That was a great caption. I thought...hmmm...would my students find that funny? What caption would they write? And so began the journey of using a series of funny and thought provoking images to get them to write. It started with enjoyable caption-writing for interesting pictures, and then having them state the points-of-view from characters within the pictures, and then stories related to funny pictures, and so on.

It was an enjoyable activity that camouflaged some serious cognitive development in my students. They were learning without even knowing it....and they enjoyed learning even though writing is difficult.

**4** Laboratory experiments (e.g. Schmidt, 2002) have repeatedly demonstrated that humorous information is recalled more easily than non-humorous information when context is held constant. What does that mean? It means that in laboratory settings...likely an office with a single participant and the researcher (and not in a classroom setting) were able to recall a greater amount of content from memory when quizzed on what was earlier presented to them through humorous content.

## 4. Assists Memory

Relevant humour can make information more memorable

Of course I realize that laboratory experiments do not always mix well with the realities of busy classrooms. However, by isolating the participants and seeing how the brain could remember content with the aid of humour, researchers did find that their recall was enhanced.

Now again, as I've mentioned before, wisdom needs to reign: humour must be relevant and appropriate to the content you want students to remember. Superfluous humour can be distracting and confusing. And you don't want students remembering the humour but missing the objective of the class lesson altogether. That defeats your purpose.

Relevant humour can make information more memorable and irrelevant humour can distract from what you want students to remember.

Let me illustrate: Let's say that you are teaching the Alberta Grade 8 Ethics class and you are currently working in Messages in Media module. Your objective today is to bring awareness of the influence that media have on an individual's life, and you think that a humorous and interesting illustration will help illustrate how easily humans are influenced. You tell your students that it is a scientific fact that it's impossible to hum while holding your nose. Did you just try it? You see, you wanted to test that statement and I caused you to hold your nose and try to hum...I influenced you. It's easy. Media does it all the time. But, is it relevant? What are you likely to remember from that illustration; that you can't hum while holding your nose. You might even remember the entire class trying to hum while holding their nose and you being frustrated when you tried to get the Grade 8 class under control again. They are, after all, Grade 8.

The point is, if the humour does not enhance the objective, don't use it. If you feel that humour could aid in remembering the content, then use it.

Let me finish up with some quick advice on using humour in your classroom:

## Quick Advice on Using Humour

### 1. Examine your goal or purpose of using humour

If the goal of humour is to increase learning and retention of course material...and not merely to lighten the mood or make the classroom a fun place to be, specific steps are recommended. Your humorous material should illustrate a concept that has just been taught, then you should paraphrase or explain the material again after the laughter subsides. Doing this reinforces what you want students to take away from the illustration. Don't assume that all of your students understood your humorous attempt. Not understanding the humour could actually cause confusion and frustration, so be safe and explain your material.

Also, ask yourself who benefits from the humorous attempt and what purpose does it serve. Be honest. Is it given to heighten students impression of you? I mean, that's not a terrible thing, but it should still be examined.

### 2. Determine if it's appropriate and sensitive

Perhaps a lot of this goes without saying, but sometimes it's good to ask ourselves if our humour would pass the test of having our principal listen to it or parents. And even then we need to think of all of our students in the class.

Let me give you an example, let's say that a student walks into my university classroom wearing the dreaded Toronto Maple Leafs hockey jersey...and I say to them as I point to the logo on the front, "Oh, you've got a stain on your jersey". When they understand this statement in line with its inference, they are likely to reply something like, "Don't tell me, you're a Habs fan!" Or some other common insult. This type of playful banter may be appropriate for many age groups but I wouldn't likely direct it at a little girl in Grade 1 who received her jersey for Christmas and is now proudly showing it off to her classmates. She might not understand the jesting and wonder why I don't like her, or her favourite team, or simply worry now that there's a stain on her favourite jersey.

This advice can also apply to a great number of situations: children new to Canada and not entirely certain of meanings, children from cultures who view humour differently than ours, children with varying levels of intellectual ability, to name a few.

### 3. Be yourself

I admire the wise use of humour and I know several teachers who are really good at it. It's easy to admire teachers like that and want to try to inject humour into your classroom, but I would say it's more important to be true to who you are and strengthen your current strengths. However, if you do want to use humour in your teaching and you don't feel you're very good at it, try to utilize material that is already available...and start small with maybe one funny illustrations or story or fun-fact that produces a chuckle from your students. The purpose of humour, of course, is to turn your classroom into a comedy festival...it's simply to provide one more approach to enhancing your positive learning environment.

As always, if you have any comments, questions or even stories that you'd like to share with me, feel free to visit my website at GoodTeaching.ca and find my contact information. Send me an email, I'd love to hear from you.

### References

Note: for a more exhaustive list of resources check out the references of these papers

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