



## **Effective Instructional Practice: Facilitating Classroom Humor**

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Instructor humor has been studied in classroom contexts for some time and is considered to be an important component of charismatic teaching (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011, 2014). Defined as intentional communication that leads to laughter and amusement through incongruous meanings (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011), humor reflects the behaviors of instructors who are interested in promoting positive affective experiences in their classrooms. According to Banas et al. (2011), the provision of humor can be facilitated in many ways, including the use of funny stories, humorous comments, jokes, puns, visual illustrations, impersonations, slang, and sarcasm, to name a few. Although the humor literature tends to focus on what instructors can do to create funny episodes in class, the importance of humor may ultimately reflect instructors' ability to facilitate an enjoyable learning environment (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015).

Humor can be categorized in a variety of ways (e.g., Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008; Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006; Gorham & Christophel, 1990). However, a review of these categories reveals that instructor humor may be best classified as it pertains to differing levels of classroom relatedness and appropriateness/offensiveness. Related classroom humor refers to humorous messages that are linked to course content (e.g., illustrating course concepts, providing examples) whereas unrelated humorous messages are not. Inappropriate or offensive classroom humor pertains to humor that targets or disparages specific students or

social groups; it also includes topics considered to be vulgar in classroom settings such as sex or drugs. Humor that is considered to be unrelated to class or is rated as either inappropriate or offensive is not related to student learning (Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010).

Facilitating classroom humor, albeit in relevant and appropriate ways, is important for three reasons. First, humor increases students' positive affective experiences in class (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015; Wanzer et al., 2010). Specifically, students who experience humorous instruction have reported liking their classes and their instructors. This positive affect helps to create a pleasant educational atmosphere and an enjoyable learning environment for students (Banas et al., 2011). Second, as a result of instructor humor, students' experiences of positive classroom affect have been subsequently linked to the fulfillment of their fundamental needs (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015) of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). This is true insofar as instructor humor can help students feel (1) like they are a part of a course in which they want to participate instead of one they are forced to attend, (2) a sense of self-efficacy and an increased resolve in the face of challenge, and (3) a sense of connectedness to their course instructors (Bolkan & Goodboy). By helping students fulfill their fundamental needs, research indicates that students should enjoy greater well-being and become more autonomously motivated (as opposed to extrinsically motivated) to succeed in their courses (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Third, sometimes humor can help students remember course information. Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) found that the use of humorous examples to illustrate course concepts is related to students' memories for these concepts, although they noted

students' ability to recall general information unrelated to humorous course content was not enhanced. As Kaplan and Pascoe argued, "general comprehension and retention of a classroom message is not improved by the use of humor" (p. 64-65). Thus, while humor may make *certain* or *specific* aspects of students' courses more memorable, it may not make *all* aspects memorable.

### **Five Tips on Using Humor in the Classroom**

1. Be relevant. When using humor in the classroom, it is important to create humorous messages that are related to course material. According to Frymier et al. (2008), relevance might be achieved to the extent that instructors use humor to illustrate course lessons, to provide an example, or to describe course concepts.

2. Avoid offensive or inappropriate humor as this type of humor is unrelated to student learning (Wanzer et al., 2010) and may do little to build goodwill with your students. According to Frymier et al. (2008), some ways to avoid this type of humor include refraining from the use of vulgar language, eschewing humor related to drugs or alcohol, and avoiding making fun of students or specific groups of individuals in a disparaging manner.

3. Use humor to highlight or explain important course concepts. Because humor can work to make specific information more memorable, you might consider what aspects of your course lessons are particularly difficult for students to recall and then create examples to illustrate these concepts in a humorous manner. By helping students learn specific course lessons in a memorable way, they should be more likely to recall this information when asked to do so at a later date.

4. Allow for humor to occur in multiple ways. That said, your use of humor in the

classroom does not have to stem from constant joking or the continual use of puns. Instead, consider the range of ways to be humorous in the classroom and think about how you can create a positive and enjoyable learning environment through the use of various techniques.

5. Don't overdo it. Instructors who are considered humorous are not standup comedians and they are not using humor so much that it detracts from the lessons they are teaching. To be considered humorous, use humor once every 15 minutes or so (Banas et al., 2011), which amounts to roughly 3-4 humorous exchanges per class meeting.

### **Assessing Your Humor**

If you want to measure your ability to use humor in the classroom, you can adapt Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield's (1991) 17-item Humor Orientation Scale to ask students to rate your ability to facilitate this impression. Alternatively, if you are interested in the types of humor students perceive you to use, you might ask students to rate the extent to which you use types of humor during class using Frymier et al.'s (2008) 25-item Teacher Humor Scale.

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