

Humor in Education: Laugh and Learn

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Humor is an important tool for the teacher in college classrooms, and its positive effects have been accepted throughout human history. Humor is widely accepted for its enhancing physiological and psychological effects in a number of diverse situations. The benefits of humor in education include improvement of problem solving, both interpersonally and in a group setting; putting the educator and the participants at ease; and promoting expression and exchange of ideas. Hizar and Bower (1992) found humor and laughter increasingly presented as an approach that can assist in meeting specific goals and objectives. Most students can recall a learning experience which they will never forget because it was presented in a humorous or playful manner.

Humor has been identified as enhancing learning. Robinson (1995) believes that what is learned with laughter is learned well. Because humor stimulates mental function, its use in the adult educational process may facilitate the learner's receptivity to the information presented and his or her willingness to explore new ideas. The implementation of humor through the use of games, simulations, role play, case studies and other related activities are all applications of the principles of adult learning.

Just as humor aids in the retention of concepts learned, it also stimulates creativity and critical thinking. The psychological function of humor allows for the expression of feelings such as empathy and anger in a constructive, witty manner. Since the affective domain strongly influences the learner's willingness to apply knowledge and skills in daily work, educators should strive to use strategies such as games that address this learning domain. Games use an interactive process that facilitates acquisition and application of cognitive, affective and /or psychomotor knowledge. When dealing with sensitive issues such as bioethics and cultural differences the use of humor in simulation games and role play can foster an openness and willingness to examine other viewpoints. White and Lewis(1990) found that looking at the comical side of

situations in which personal value conflicts frequently arise may lessen the learner's sense of threat because the game is conducted in an informal atmosphere.

Despite the recognition of its importance, there has been little attempt by educators to make conscious, deliberate use of humor in the educational setting. The planned use of humor in the educational process as content in the curriculum and as a learning tool remains an uncommon occurrence. Unfortunately the educational process has long been associated with formal discourse. Educators are always speaking about the serious student. Regardless of how good an educator is at presenting, content alone is not necessarily going to keep everyone's attention and interest for the whole presentation. Could this solemnity of what is being taught and how it is being taught be what is driving numbers of bright students out of college? Using humor in the classroom not only enhances the learning process and fosters the student teacher relationship, but it can also become the vehicle for developing the student's ability to relate in a warm and friendly way to others.

There are four interrelated aspects to be considered in the area of education and humor: enhancing the learning process itself through humor; facilitating the process of socialization through humor; teaching the concept of humor as a communication and intervention tool; and modeling the use of humor as a vehicle for facilitating the other three.

We are faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal for survival is the facilitation of change and learning. The concepts of creativity and change are closely related to each other and to humor and learning. Cultivating our sense of humor requires that we learn to thrive on change.

Theoretical Rationale

Extensive research by Ziv (1989) has demonstrated that humor does improve learning in school children and that it is positively correlated with creativity. A humorous approach stimulates divergent thinking, the creation of new ideas and new ways of looking at situations. Laughter has a liberating effect on the flow of ideas. Ziv's studies have shown that the open, humorous teacher in the classroom is more effective in creating an atmosphere conducive to better academic work. Higher humor that is relevant to what is being taught (not sarcasm or ridicule but humor which invites all to share in those defects common to all men), improves learning. Ziv also found that humor may be a better predictor of leadership IQ.

Zillman and Bryant (1983) demonstrated the positive effects of humor on learning. They found that humor used with college age students must be relevant to the subject be-

ing taught. Unrelated humor used by the professor detracts from the student-teacher rapport and has detrimental effects on the acquisition of information. On the other hand, the involvement of relevant humor that is well integrated into the educational message may lead to superior retention of the information and is likely to make the learning experience more enjoyable as well as enhance the student-teacher rapport. Fry points out that some physiological results of laughter include the stimulation of the production of adrenaline in the brain, which increases alertness and memory, thereby enhancing the learning process.

Humor must be a component of any learning theory. Rather than a relationship to one particular theory of learning, humor and laughter contribute to all those necessary principles of learning regardless of the theory: enjoyment; creativity; interest; motivation; a relaxed, open, warm environment; a positive student-teacher relationship; and decreased tension and anxiety. Probably humor most closely aligns itself with the humanistic approach to education. Building a positive self image, identifying the self actualized person and finding meaning in one's life are the goals of the humanistic movement. Maslow (1970), who pioneered this movement defined the self actualized man as having a philosophical, unhostile sense of humor. Humor and laughing can produce a momentary experience akin to self actualization in terms of creating new perspectives. This approach enables the educator not only to poke fun at himself but to use a sense of humor to remind others of their vulnerability. Maslow defines humor and laughter as education in a palatable form. To be real and genuine is one of the most important qualities of a teacher who facilitates learning. Having a sense of humor is an aspect of being real. Eble(1966) states that laughter creates the very air in which learning thrives. Laughter is giving and recognizing. It forces a physical giving that relaxes for a moment the inner self. Such giving is necessary to prepare the self to learn. Eble suggests that parents consider laughter even before love because laughter keeps love from smothering and if we laugh we are bound to love.

Conditions

Humor can be used in a variety of ways in the classroom. The use of humor to facilitate the learning process by creating an open, trusting environment which puts students at ease and prepares them to open up and experience new concepts and ideas is one condition for the use of humor. Faculty can use humorous examples or present concepts humorously to help students comprehend and retain lecture material. Another use for higher humor is to help socialize the student. The use of humor in education is a mechanism that does not destroy one's self image, but provides a way to criticize, show mistakes and express values, yet save face for students and imply caring in so doing. Robinson, (1995) points out that the educator when relating humorous experiences may indi-

cate mistakes that he has made. This can help students, who usually have unrealistic expectations of their own performances, to relax and accept the learning process.

Planning and Modifying

With any teaching strategy, the effective use of humor needs to be learned and refined. Before using humor in teaching situations educators may want to assess their sense of humor using a humor profile such as the one developed by White and Lewis(1990). The score obtained on the humor profile reflects the degree to which educators could improve their abilities to use humor as a teaching strategy. Completion of a humor profile may provide insight into a person's ability to lightheartedly accept and tolerate self and others and a willingness to transgress from conformity to innovation in instruction. Once educators have assessed their senses of humor in teaching, the next step is to make a commitment to explore ways to include humor in the educational content. Learning and humor go hand in hand in the use of icebreakers, learning exercises, jokes, games and cartoons. Observing others who use similar techniques is helpful. Humorous material should be collected by listening and talking with colleagues and writing down humorous anecdotes.

Humor is appropriate for both graduate and undergraduate students provided it is relevant to the content being taught. College students respond very well to the use of relevant humor in the learning process. The use of humor in the form of game playing or joke telling makes learning fun. What is taught in an atmosphere of fun and open interaction is learned well.

Resources

Humor can be used in all settings. However if games, cooperative play or magic techniques are chosen, tiered lecture halls will inhibit the students from relating in the game format. Special equipment can be used depending on the objectives and type of humor implemented. The use of humor to facilitate learning can require no additional resources if the educator chooses to tell anecdotal stories of his own experiences. However, if games are being used to facilitate learning, various props and video/audio equipment may be required. The object is to use whatever equipment necessary to integrate the humor activity into the educational process.

Using humor in the learning process can take a number of forms. Some faculty may feel most comfortable using spontaneous storytelling by relating their own experiences to enhance the learning process. The use of jokes, anecdotal situations and humorous exercises may be used to establish a sense of trust and increase the learners' receptivity to information and participation during content presentation. Educators who have never used, or are not comfortable using, spontaneous humor in the classroom might choose to use pre-developed

exercises or games. It is important to ensure that the participants do not become so involved in the chosen activity they miss the point of the educational content. White and Lewis (1990) recommend that if this approach is taken the teacher should select the game/exercise after the learning objective has been set. Before using a game or exercise it is recommended that a pilot test be done at least once with a group of people not involved with the immediate presentation. This will help to determine the effectiveness of the game in meeting the preconceived objectives. Faculty must realize that what works for some people does not necessarily work for others. All games may have different outcomes each time they are used. Like all types of teaching, these structured games/exercises must be evaluated for their work and effectiveness.

An educator's primary responsibility is to ensure clarity and precision of information. If the teacher can keep animated by providing entertainment value, receptivity of the participants to the game being used will be enhanced. Facilitators must debrief all of the exercises and games carried out during the educational session. Debriefing puts the participants back together when the game has finished and allows the educator and participants to experience their feelings and outcomes of the game. Kroehnert (1991) found that incorporating play through the use of games in the classroom is not only fun for both the teacher and the participants but greatly enhances the learning process.

Potential problems

Educators must be completely honest and open with their participants. This includes not using hidden agendas, not misleading students, not setting anyone up, not deceiving participants and using the students' efforts for personal gain.

Humor in the classroom setting is undesirable if a student is the target of the humor. Also there are significant differences in how the genders react to humor. When a game is chosen for the classroom the educator should consider the following when an assessment of its potential effects is made:

- Does the game encourage the players to laugh with as opposed to laugh at one another?
- Is it cooperative in nature?
- Does the game take positive action?
- Is the game inclusive in nature?
- Do the participants feel more connected with the other members of the class as a result of playing the game?
- Does the game provide opportunities for the players to be imaginative and spontaneous as well as provide room for recreation?
- Can the participants' individual goals and standards be met?

- Is it challenging? Does it facilitate the content being taught?
- Is it FUN?

Use Of Humor In The Classroom:

In health care not all situations lend themselves to humor, but even a relatively somber, scientific discussion as to why the sphincter ani must be preserved when performing surgery in that area is described by Bornemeier(1960) in an amusing style:

They say that man has succeeded where animals fail because of the clever use of his hands, yet when compared to the hands the sphincter ani is far superior. If you place into your cupped hands a mixture of fluid, solid and gas and then through an opening at the bottom try to let only the gas escape, you will fail. Yet the sphincter ani can do it! The sphincter apparently can differentiate between solid, fluid and gas. It obviously can tell whether its owner is alone or with someone, whether standing or sitting down, or whether its owner has his pants on or off. No other muscle in the body is such a protector of the dignity of man yet so ready to come to his relief. A muscle like this is worth protecting.

In stressing the significance of using critical thinking skills when confronted with a problematic situation, Bornemeier (1960) describes an exercise that requires both creativity and analytic ability may be used. One such exercise would be to give the participants the task of removing an object from a tall cylinder, using any resource at their disposal, without tipping the cylinder. Usually participants identify elaborate time-consuming solutions. At the end of a specified time, the less obvious but most effective solution is demonstrated. As water is poured from the educator's water pitcher into the cylinder the learners watch the object rise to the top. Most laugh and acknowledge the foolishness of their efforts and their inability to identify the most simple, efficient, and creative solution to the problem. Becoming actively involved with each phase requiring critical thinking skills is more beneficial than merely listening to an explanation of the concept. In the end the learning process is more explorative and imaginative.

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Test Taking Strategies: A Collaborative Approach

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As many of our students know, test taking can be a stressful, bewildering, and disheartening process. What is more, test taking and the all important score generated from such tests as the SAT, TCT, and GRE determine and provide us with a theoretical "profile" of sorts that determines entry into a university, school or program and even scholarship awards. With such weighty concerns, it is easy to see why many find test taking stressful. However, with good preparation that takes into account the many facets that have an impact on test scores and ability, a student can mentally, physically and intellectually prepare for a testing situation and expect to achieve moderate success.

For years students have been barraged with test taking advice such as "if you don't know the answer, always pick C.." and "you never have three of the same responses in a row." In addition to these there is still the pervading belief that the best way to prepare for any test is to cram like mad right up to the test. If we can change these beliefs and motivate students to begin to look at the test taking experience as an exercise in which they have control, we can certainly expect the stress from the test to dissipate as confidence grows.

I instruct students to prepare for the test taking experience in three ways: physiologically, intellectually and with common sense. Each have their own impact on test taking and each should be addressed with equal care and concern.

Physiological Preparation

I am constantly amazed at the lack of attention paid to physiological preparation for test taking. Students often ignore advice given by the most respected athletes in the world, that advice being, "the body is a machine and must be prepared for the activity you demand from it." What is true for the sports world is true for academics; students must pay attention to the demands of the body in preparing for an exam. Often we rely upon the cliché portrayal of studying being made up of students burning the midnight oil, consuming huge quantities of caffeine, eating inappropriate meals if at all, no exercise and ignoring the body's demands for sleep. The body, especially the brain, needs three things to run at peak performance; oxygen, energy and rest. What we can do to improve the body's reception of these critical components will have an impact on how the body performs in the athletic arena as well as the academic. Here are some widely accepted basic tips:

1. No red meat or heavy meals with complex fibers, fats or oils the night before or the day of the exam.
2. No smoking the day of the exam. Smoking puts Carbon Dioxide and Monoxide into the blood stream. Both of the gases more readily bond with blood hemoglobin, thus, depriving the body of this important gas and, thus, decreasing the amount of oxygen that goes into the brain and body. If it can be avoided no smoking the night before.