

Humor in the Classroom

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By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

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Humor is one of my favorite teaching tools. I rely on it—when the room feels tense, when I sense learner drift, if I aspire to make a point more memorable. Humor doesn't cause learning, but it does help create conditions conducive to it. It doesn't make hard content easy, but it can make learning it feel easier.

I am still pretty regularly criticized for my use of humor—I have been known to use too much. The long-standing objection is that education is serious business. It's no laughing matter. Our goal is education; not entertainment. Writing about the history of humor in the classroom, Debra Korobkin notes that before the 20th century, “collectively, teachers perceived instructing with a sense of humor as unprofessional, uncontrolled, and undignified.” (p. 154) Use humor and don't expect to be taken as a serious professional. Some of that thinking still lingers today.



I admit that it is certainly possible for presentation skills to compromise the integrity of the educational endeavor. I believe that occurs whenever what happens in a course is more about teaching than learning—performance teaching, I call it. The focus is on what the teacher does, and learning is assumed the automatic outcome of charismatic displays of pedagogical prowess. That is not a problem most teachers have. We're way closer to the education side of the entertainment-education continuum with only sporadic humorous interludes.

If we are honest, I think many of us aren't really sure how to be funny in the classroom. The good news is that humor takes so many different forms. It doesn't have to be a polished routine. It doesn't have to bring down the house. It can be other people's material, such as jokes (professionally appropriate, of course), comics, or cartoons. It can be dry wit, silly puns, or other kinds of plays on words. Sometimes humor involves making the most of serendipitous events. I often tell of the time when I was lecturing students about poor performance on an exam and explaining the addition of a new assignment to redress what so many of them didn't know. We were in a windowless room and as I finished the lecture and returned to the security of the podium, the lights in the room went out. It was dark and quiet,

until a voice in the back of the room announced, “God didn’t want you to do that to us.” As a class, we laughed about that event for the rest of the semester.

There’s been research on humor, not a lot, and not much that establishes its benefits with empirical rigor. So what various writers propose as the benefits of humor can’t be called evidence-based, but most of them make good intuitive sense. Humor helps students retain content. It makes material memorable. A recent article by a biologist explores the use of stories in teaching (see the December issue of the [Teaching Professor newsletter](#) for more on this). Early in the class, this instructor reads students a letter from “Twisted in Tallahassee” recounting a lifelong identity crisis. It just so happens that “Twisted” is a bizarre-looking insect known as a twisted-wing parasite. Given that introduction, who could forget the creature?

Humor connects teachers and students. It creates that sense of community, how we’re all in this together, how we all make stupid mistakes and need to laugh at our foibles. It keeps students interested and attentive. Some of us think it helps put students at ease—encouraging discussion and engaging exploration of topics and issues.

Of course, humor can be inappropriate. A large student survey identified humor that disparages students as the most inappropriate—snide comments about students, what they don’t know, how they don’t think, or what they believe. It isn’t funny to make fun of students. It’s also inappropriate to use humor that disparages groups of people and relies on stereotypes. Sometimes we hide behind humor, saying what we really think and then quickly adding, “I was only joking.” Not a good idea.

Can you learn to be funny? I’m not sure, but I think you can learn to bring to the classroom those expressions of humor that make people smile. You don’t have to have them rolling in the aisles, but small smiles and sighs at your attempts let you know that students recognize and appreciate the effort.

References: Korobkin, D., (1988). Humor in the classroom: Considerations and strategies. *College Teaching*, 36 (4), 154-158.

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