

Teaching Funny: Where Humor Stands in the Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this State of the Art is to summarize the concept of humor as it is utilized in the classroom by compiling several research projects and theories to grasp a better understanding of where the research and concept stands today. The effect of humor in the classroom has proven to be effective in increasing immediacy and motivation. Humor can also determine how students view the classroom environment itself. Several research projects have led to a better understanding of not only the effect humor has on students, but it also has taught us what types of humor are viewed as inappropriate and how each type of inappropriate humor impacts students in the areas of motivation, self esteem, and other attitudes towards the professor and their own scholastic performance.

Despite the knowledge gained through this research, there are still several other areas of humor and its place in the classroom that isn't understood. Not everyone has the same concept of what humor is. Some professors might even find humor a difficult concept and talent to master. If humor can be beneficial to classroom environments, it could be beneficial to find ways to teach professors a better understanding of humor. Humor can often be lost in translation, so professors attempting to cross cultural borders could also benefit in learning how to better understand humor, from one culture to the next.

Keywords: humor, aggressive, efficiency, effectiveness, homophily, immediacy

Introduction

With tuition costs and university attendance rising, academic organizations are seeking ways to be more effective and more appealing to students. Research has continued to investigate what allows professors to be more effective, from immediacy and homophily to misbehaviors and humor. Professors and students alike often want the students to come away from classes with as much as they can. Research often helps formulate a playbook in which professors can pull from in order to make their lessons and teaching style more effective. By increasing their skills as teachers, they can increase student's motivation and participation, and in turn their output. Professors can influence their students in more ways than just their syllabus. How professors present themselves and treat their students can be an important element of the classroom environment. This classroom etiquette can affect the professor's efficiency dramatically, therefore an understanding of the proper way to present themselves is an important concept for professors to grasp.

In recent years, new revelations have been made regarding the concept of what is proper etiquette in the classroom. One area of this study has involved humor. It has moved beyond the point of whether or not humor has a place in the classroom and onto what type of humor is appropriate and what type is most effective. After categorizing types of humor into subcategories like offensive, aggressive, sarcastic, ironic or subtle, these different types of humor are then analyzed and conclusions are drawn about the effects of each different type of humor. Through this research and analysis a general concept of what kind of humor is appropriate for the classroom can be developed. More importantly, professors can have a better understanding of

what type of humor not to use if they want to motivate their students and keep them engaged in classes and the subjects being taught.

The study of humor in the classroom has evolved from a mere concept into a study of implications, effectiveness and results. Studies in recent years have presented the phenomena of humor in the classroom and the benefits of utilizing it during teaching. While humor has been dissected into categories, classified as good or bad and ranked on effectiveness, there are still several outstanding questions in this area of instructional communication. There is still an outstanding amount of research that can be conducted in finding answers to questions involving cross-cultural humor. In addition to the difficulties associated with finding humor across cultures, some professors and teachers just might be lacking in charisma and a sense of humor. Whatever the reason, the question arises as to how a teacher or professor can learn to be funny.

Literature Review

Identifying exactly what humor in the classroom sounds or looks like is a difficult struggle. Bonjour (2011) said humor, “brings together a chain-reaction by increasing the learner's motivation and self-confidence which creates a positive classroom atmosphere for the smooth acquisition of the language.” Despite centuries of philosophical ponderings of what exactly humor is and what makes something humorous, researchers have still been able to categorize, subcategorize and analyze it. They have been able to mark some humor as appropriate and others as inappropriate.

Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, and Smith (2006) determined that if humor is used in the classroom it must not offend students and should help the teacher achieve the lessons they are presenting. As it pertains to the classroom, they classified four types of humor that are

appropriate; related, unrelated, self-disparaging and unintentional. When referring to relevant or non-relevant humor, Wanzer et al. referred to whether or not the humor was related to the course material or lesson of the lecture. Self-disparaging referred to the professor or teacher making humorous comments about him or herself. They viewed any type of humor that disparaged students as inappropriate and counter-productive. Unintentional was humor that was not planned and could often be called accidental.

Bryant, Comisky and Zillmann (1979) broke humor down into subcategories of jokes, riddles, puns, stories, comments and a sixth subcategory that encompassed all other types of humor. Within all of these categories and subcategories, each of these types of humor could then be classified as appropriate or not. It is this appropriateness level that could further determine the success a student had in learning from the professor.

Effectiveness

When the average student's attention span can often begin to deteriorate around 20 minutes (Bonjour 2011), teachers and professors are always looking for more innovative and successful methods of keeping their student's attentions through 50 minute or longer classes. One such possibility can be found in the appropriate use of humor in the classroom. The effects of humor on the classroom can be either positive or negative, depending on how the humor is used and how it is classified. If humor is used in the appropriate level and does not challenge students perceptions of tasteful or appropriate, then students can see several benefits from its presence in the classroom. Mogavero (1979) suggested that humor primarily created a more positive learning environment. In his research with college-level journalism students, he found that when asking how humor in their lectures affected their learning experience, less than 15% of

comments involved mechanical aspects of the professors teaching skills. The remainder of comments revolved more around environment and classroom climate. This research was supported by Stuart and Rosenfeld (1994) who found that while humor didn't necessarily affect retention and learning, it did affect the classroom environment.

Among the other positive aspects of humor in the classroom, Mogavero (1979) found that humor can establish a more friendly rapport between student and teacher. He also found that humor helped to create an interest in topics and lessons and helped maintain the student's attention. Despite being a tactic to help keep students interested in lessons and topics, students didn't see it as such. Mogavero found that students rarely perceived the use of humor as a 'ploy,' much the way they perceived other types of teaching aids, which they saw as an attempt by the professor to hold the student's interest.

Misbehaviors

Kearney, Plax, and Burroughs (1991) conducted a great deal of research into the concept of teacher misbehaviors and their effects on students. Teacher misbehavior can be classified as types of communication, be it verbal, non-verbal or even written that cause negative distractions that can and often do interfere with how students learn. Students can also be affected in other areas of their learning by teacher misbehaviors. Classroom climates and environments are often created through the way a teacher acts and what they say and do. Students can also be less motivated or find themselves in a more defensive stance when teachers misbehave.

While appropriate forms of humor can create a more inviting climate and comfortable environment, inappropriate humor can cause problems, including but not limited to student resistance, lower student motivation and a lack of immediacy. (Martinez-Egger, A & Powers, W.,

2007) Inappropriate humor is just one of many teacher misbehaviors classified by Wazner et al. (2006). This humor can include sarcasm, insults, stories about drug and alcohol use and even stories with sexually explicit or vulgar material contained within. Just as appropriate humor can have positive effects in the classroom, this type of humor can have very negative effects. Maresh (2010) showed that as the perceived hurtfulness of negative messages went up, motivation and affective learning went down. Since inappropriate and insulting humor, aimed at students can cause a perceived hurtfulness among students, this type of negative humor should be avoided.

Stuart and Rosenfeld (1994) found that hostile humor created a perceived classroom environment among students of low support and high order and high organization with a high degree of teacher control. While inappropriate humor or an absence of humor could lead to a more formal, less supportive environment, the use of too much humor can also cause a negative classroom environment. An over-abundance of humor in the classroom created an atmosphere of disorder and a lack of teacher control causing a sense of defensiveness.

Keeping in mind, most of these studies revolved around student perceptions. Mogavero (1979) noticed that when investigating the different types of humor found in the classroom, that students often associated their own personal favorite type of humor with the type of humor being presented in class. While this caused a slight berth of accuracy, it should be noted that students were still able to easily identify appropriate and inappropriate types of humor.

How to Use Humor

While humor can have positive effects in the classroom, it doesn't mean that professors should attempt to develop a comedy routine that would make Bill Cosby proud. Drawing the line between "just-right" and "too much" or "too little" may seem like walking a tightrope

between humiliation and success, but in the end, successful and award-winning teachers only use humor on average little more than three times in a fifty minute class period. (Wanzer, 2006)

Professors and teachers shouldn't worry about quality of the humorous material as most students simply appreciate the humor breaking up the mundane classroom experience. In a study conducted by Mogavero (1979) among college journalism students, 95% of the students appreciated the humor utilized in lectures despite the fact that students classified only 5% of their professor's humor as 'ready for Vegas,' and an overwhelming majority of more than 61% classified their professor's humor as possibly successful at a 'cocktail party.' The lowest ranking 19.2% of professors were considered worthy of 'rotten eggs and tomatoes.'

This does not necessarily mean that all humor is appropriate humor. While it doesn't need to be ready for prime time, the humor should still be air-able during prime time. As previously discussed there are several types of appropriate and inappropriate humor. Simply staying within the bounds of good taste and common sense and following the guidelines set forth by previous research should give a professor the proper understanding of what could be used in the classroom. Primarily, however, when selecting which jokes, comments or stories to use, the professors should stay within the topic of the course or the day's lessons and should remain relevant to the subject matter. (Javidi, Downs, Nussbaum, 1988)

Humor should not be limited to lectures and lessons. Bonjour (2011) said that since humor can often help relieve stress, that using a joke or two in tests can also help reduce tension and can therefore help in raising test scores.

Lessons can also be learned about the lack of humor. Not all professors are in search of the informal, more friendly teaching environment. Some professors may find the need for a

more professional and formal environment, or they may just prefer that climate. Professors who desire this type of classroom can learn from the previous research in so much as a lack of humor can create a more formal classroom environment. (Stuart & Rosenfeld, 1994)

Discussion

Research into the area of humor in the classroom has already yielded many changes into the appreciation and acknowledgement of its use in the academic arena. The short and long-term benefits of appropriate humor have been proven to positively affect student's motivation and overall appreciation and acceptance of their professors and teachers. There are still many aspects and areas of study that need to be researched in the topic of humor in the classroom.

As can be seen in research conducted by Zhang, Zhang and Castelluccio (2011) cultures can play a large part in the way students perceive their teachers. In China, students tended to show more resistance to teachers due to their offensiveness while students in the United States tended to give more resistance to professors due to their indolence and incompetence. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) explain that students in China view teachers and professors differently from students in the United States as a whole. Chinese students see teachers as an authority of a topic and are a conduit for knowledge while US students view teachers in a slightly more friendly nature and see them as a facilitator of knowledge as opposed to an authority of it.

The difference in the way students see teachers varies greatly from China to the United States and this variation can cause a wide range of different results from one teacher behavior to the next. This includes humor. Some cultures may see humor as less appropriate as others. It is conceivable that humor could be studied in practically every culture, no matter how big or small, to explore all aspects of the phenomena. More than likely, though, it could be narrowed down to

three to four standard types of cultures depending on whether a culture views humor in the classroom indifferently, as a distraction, appropriate, or neutrally. Studies should not need to be conducted on a city to city level, or even a country to country basis. Countries and cultures could easily be classified into these subcategories of how they view humor, but more research should be conducted into exactly how these three to five different cultural types can affect student learning.

While cultural differences have also been studied in terms of teacher misbehaviors, it has not specifically been addressed in terms of humor. Oftentimes humor can be ‘lost in translation,’ and students may not be offended by a professor’s attempt at humor but may simply not understand it due to these cultural differences. While this type of humor may not be directly classified as appropriate or inappropriate, it should be classified and studied. A professor should certainly be warned if their attempts of humor can be a distraction to a class or not. In some environments this may be interpreted and received as endearing and could help bolster the student/teacher relationship. Which way this type of humor tends to lean is not fully understood or researched and it could be beneficial to find these answers.

Most importantly, the area of research should now begin to focus on areas of investigation into what to do with the knowledge that past research has garnished. While it is now known that humor can help bolster student’s motivations and their perception of professors, several teachers and professors may wish to better understand how they can utilize these studies and the appropriate types of humor into their own teaching styles. Not everyone is inherently graced with a sense of humor, though. Some professors may find it difficult to handle the fine art

of laughter and may feel uncomfortable when their constant attempts at humor continue to be followed by the deafening sound of silence instead of the room full of appreciative laughter.

Finally, in light of the fact that Stuart and Rosenfeld (1994) clearly showed the inconclusive nature of whether or not humor affects student retention and learning abilities, additional research should be performed in order to investigate and verify one way or another how humor affects these two classroom characteristics. If contradictory research continues to be concluded, perhaps alternative reasons for the positive outcomes should be theorized and tested.

Whether these cases are rare or not could be investigated in their own right, but more importantly with the knowledge that humor in the classroom can benefit the professor and the students, the path to teaching humor to teachers should be studied. This can also apply to those teachers competing against cross-cultural barriers. That humor that is ‘lost in translation,’ could possibly be found again through the proper education of what humor is and exactly how to be funny. This research should also be able to teach us whether or not someone can ‘teach funny.’

Conclusion

Humor can still be an extremely elusive skill to master. Despite the difficulty it could take to wield appropriately, research has shown that it is a skill worthy of having, not just in academia and the classroom environment, but in life in general. The ability to stand up in front of a classroom full of students takes a decent amount of self-confidence to begin with. This self-confidence usually is accompanied by the ability to at least slightly entertain their audience, so teachers and professors, in general, probably should not have a long way to go to learn the best way to be funny in their classes.

Perhaps the most difficult obstacle professors and teachers may have in bringing humor into their classrooms are their administrators. Some superiors may see the use of any humor in the classroom as inappropriate and could at the very least discourage using laughter in the classroom to teach, and at the worst forbid it. With continued research and continued interest in humor in the classroom, this phenomenon and its positive effects can continue to be popularized and its benefits could eventually be grasped by administrators and even lead them to encourage their teachers and professors to pursue humor as a teaching technique.

The benefits of humor in the classroom should not be ignored, and it appears through the amount of research being conducted on the topic that it is not. However, more research needs to be conducted if for no other reason than to demonstrate the legitimacy of the concept and draw more attention to it. Any tool that a teacher can use to benefit their students should be explored and examined to its fullest extent.

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