

# USING HUMOR IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM TO ENHANCE TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS IN "DREAD COURSES".

by NEELAM KHER, SUSAN MOLSTAD and ROBERTA DONAHUE

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Humor is a valuable teaching tool for establishing a classroom climate conducive to learning. This article identifies opportunities for incorporating humor in the college classroom, reviews the impact of humor on learning outcomes, and suggests guidelines for the appropriate use of humor. Of particular interest is humor in "dread courses" which students may avoid due to a lack of self-confidence, perceived difficulty of the material or a previous negative experience in a content area. Appropriate and timely humor in the college classroom can foster mutual openness and respect and contribute to overall teaching effectiveness.

As institutions of higher education engage in organizational soul searching, the teaching activities of the faculty are receiving increased attention. Scholars in the field of higher education underscore the importance of effective teaching and facilitating student learning outcomes has become a primary concern of university faculty and administrators. Well respected scholars such as Ernest Boyer, Alexander Astin, and Sylvia Grider have highlighted the need for instructional improvement in higher education in recent years. The focus on the student is a fundamental theme in instructional effectiveness (Kher, 1996).

The role of the teacher in producing student-centered learning has been the subject of considerable discussion. Pollio and Humphreys (1996) found effective teaching revolved around the connection established between the instructor and the student. The behavior of the teacher influences the quality of instruction and the learning environment that is created (Lowman, 1994). It is the faculty members who primarily determine the quality of the experience in the classroom (Cross, 1993). Duffy and Jones (1995) describe the professor, content and student as interactive and interdependent, each shaped by the characteristics and requirements of the other two. Lowman found the most common descriptor of effective college teachers was "enthusiastic," and teachers are considered to be both performers and motivators. As Loomans and Kolberg (1993) remarked, enthusiasm and laughter are often infectious.

Teachers must be creative because of the critical role they play in creating an environment conducive to optimal student learning. Humor is often identified as a teaching technique for developing a positive learning environment (Ferguson & Campinha-Bacote, 1989; Hill, 1988; Schwarz,

1989; Warnock, 1989; Walter, 1990). When an instructor establishes a supportive social climate, students are more likely to be receptive to learning. Humor is a catalyst for classroom "magic," when all the educational elements converge and teacher and student are both positive and excited about learning. Instructors can foster classroom "magic" through improved communication with students by possessing a playful attitude and a willingness to use appropriate humor (Duffy & Jones, 1995).

The purpose of this article is to identify opportunities for humor in the college classroom, discuss how humor affects learning outcomes, and present guidelines for the appropriate use of humor, particularly in "dread courses." A "dread course" is one that students sometimes avoid due to a lack of self-confidence, perceived difficulty of the material, or a previous negative experience in a content area such as mathematics. According to Korobkin, (1988) humor can diminish this anxiety and reduce the threatening nature of the course by changing the tone of the instructional process. Research also suggests humor is helpful in teaching sensitive content areas such as Sexuality Education (Adams, 1974) and high anxiety courses such as Statistics, Research Design, and Tests and Measurements (Berk & Popham, 1995). By reducing anxiety, humor improves student receptiveness to alarming or difficult material, and ultimately has a positive affect on test performance (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillmann, 1980).

## Opportunities to Incorporate Humor

Humor in the classroom can take many forms. In a classic study of humor in the college classroom, Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1979) classified humor in lectures as jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments and other humorous items. Professors have discovered other creative ways to incorporate humor in classes such as cartoons, top ten lists, comic verse, and phony or bogus experiments (for a complete discussion of sources and forms of humor see Wandersee, 1982).

Humor may be interjected in various phases of the instructional process. For example, instructors could include a humorous twist to a syllabus by including a course prerequisite "must have watched 18 hours of Sesame Street" (Berk & Popham, 1995). They could use a top ten list to introduce themselves to the students, "top ten things you should know about your instructor" (Kher & Molstad, 1995). Humorous examples, test items or test instructions could reduce anxiety on intellectually

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demanding tasks (McMorris, Urbach, & Connor, 1985). Appendices A and B provide examples of how humor might be used by the instructor to help reduce student anxiety related to "dread courses." Starting each class with humor helps students relax and creates a positive atmosphere. Humorous breaks during a lesson promote learning by allowing the brain a "breather" to process and integrate lesson material (Loomans & Kolberg, 1993).

Humor can serve a variety of purposes for the college instructor. For example, having students share their "goofiest moment in a classroom" can be used as an ice breaker or to reduce stress and facilitate creativity (Korobkin, 1988). It can be used as a powerful tool to put students at ease and make the overall learning process more enjoyable. This is accomplished when instructors integrate humor with content and use both planned and spontaneous humor.

Humor may also be used to communicate issues related to classroom management. Teachers can display the "instructor's top ten peeves" to correct behavior in a humorous way, without unduly embarrassing any class members (see Appendix C). Humor has been used successfully to communicate implicit classroom rules, fostering greater understanding and rapport between the teacher and the students (Proctor, 1994). Walter (1990) noted that students who laugh reduce the need to act out and cause disturbances. Humor in the classroom is not the answer to all classroom management issues, but it is an excellent preventive measure and can often diffuse tense situations (Loomans & Kolberg, 1993).

### Linking Humor and Learning Outcomes

Considerable research has been conducted to identify the relationship between an instructor's use of humor and learning outcomes. Humor is useful in facilitating attention and motivation (Bandes, 1988; Bryant et al., 1979; Wandersee, 1982) and comprehension (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) found students were able to improve retention when instructors used humorous examples by linking learning to the use of mnemonic devices as shown in Appendix D. Jokes and anecdotes seem to provide a memorable context for student recall (Hill, 1988). McMorris et al. (1985) determined incorporating humor in test items reduced the negative effect of testing situations.

Students in a study by Bryant et al. (1980) tended to view male professors who used humor frequently as more appealing, better presenters and better teachers than those who did not use humor. The small number of women instructors in the study who frequently used humor

received lower effectiveness ratings. Using a larger sample size, Gotham and Christophel (1990) did not find the use of humor to negatively influence the evaluations of female instructors. It has been shown that teachers who effectively use humor are able to convey course content more effectively (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988). Although researchers have not specifically identified "dread course" content in researching the impact of humor on learning, it is reasonable to expect similar results with these courses. Students perceive the barriers to learning to be inherent in "dread courses," therefore, the effect of humor on learning may be even greater than in the average course.

### Guidelines for Appropriate Use of Humor

Humor is most effective when it is appropriate to the situation and reflects the personality of the instructor (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992). The appropriate use of humor is a powerful tool to build a sense of community, promote creativity, and reduce conflict. Judicious use of humor by the instructor sets people at ease and reduces the inherent inequity of the status relationship and the situation with the students (Korobkin, 1988). In contrast, inappropriate use of humor creates a hostile learning environment that quickly stifles communication and self-esteem (Loomans & Kolberg, 1993). When a college student is the target of ridicule, humor has a negative effect on the classroom climate (Edwards & Gibboney, 1992).

The power of humor is such that it must never be directed at an individual or a group; racial slurs or put-downs of a target group must be avoided (Snetsinger & Grabowski, 1993). The targeted students' discomfort is magnified by the fact that leaving the situation is not usually a viable option and thus they become class scapegoats. An instructor must resist the temptation to refer to ethnicity, family, disability, appearance or any other identifier that a student might find offensive when couched in a humorous context (Harris, 1989). A joke that is at the expense of a group or individual may result in a variety of negative consequences in the classroom and can even turn students away from an entire field of study.

The manner in which humor is delivered also affects how it is received by students. Instructors delivering humor through insult or sarcasm may be defeating the purpose usually served by humor (Brown, 1995; Edwards & Gibboney, 1992). Humor that is sexually suggestive is best avoided unless it is directly associated with content such as sexuality education. If such humor is used, great care needs to be exercised in the way it is presented to the class.

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Teachers are powerful role models and as such can use appropriate humor in the classroom to enhance a sense of community (Harris, 1989). Humor can be nurtured and integrated into the classroom such that it fosters a sense of openness and respect between students and teachers. When students feel safe, they can enjoy the learning process and each other. The thoughtful use of humor by instructors can contribute to teaching effectiveness.

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### Appendix A Top 10 Things More Fun Than Stats

10. Having your wisdom teeth extracted.
9. Watching "Barney" for 12 consecutive hours.
8. Trying to get across the river at 5:00.
7. Listening to bagpipe music.
6. Having your computer crash on the last page of your term paper.
5. Having your paperwork lost at financial Aid.
4. Jogging at noon with a heat index of 112.
3. Waiting in line at fee payment.
2. Being attacked by a roving pack of Rottweilers.
1. Finding a parking spot on campus!

### Appendix B STATISTICAL ANXIETY

#### Know All Your options ...

If you have recently been diagnosed with statistical anxiety you may be a candidate for an alternative to brain surgery called STATISTICAL SEED IMPLANT. This form of treatment is offered by an experienced implant team and just might be an option that will work for you. Statistical seed implant offers many advantages over brain surgery.

#### Advantages of Statistical Seed Implant Over Brain Surgery

- Eliminates possible complications from surgery
- Minimal discomfort

-Cost effective, requiring minimal hospitalization often just overnight

-Short recovery time - patients return to statistics classes and can work on statistics problems almost immediately

-No need for transfusions

-No loss of power or freedom

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### Appendix C Top 10 Pet Peeves of Your Instructor

10. The overhead projector just will not cooperate.
9. Students mistaking Wolverines for Spartans.
8. People think it's cute to imitate her accent.
7. Unable to find the perfect cartoon to go with the day's lesson.
6. People pronounce her name Dr. Cur or Dr. Carr.
5. People think all statistics teachers are nerds, dweebs or geeks.
4. Students click pens, talk among themselves, play cards or squeak their chairs while she lectures.
3. Students who not only sleep in class but snore!
2. Students who think "class break" means "class dismissed."
1. Students who say, "I didn't have time to do my homework," and think it's a good excuse.

### Appendix D Spikes vs. Platforms 1

Running Head: HEIGHT ENHANCEMENT AND NAPOLEONIC COMPLEX

SPIKES VS. PLATFORMS: THE RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OF TWO HEIGHT ENHANCEMENT TECHNIQUES IN THE REDUCTION OF NAPOLEONIC COMPLEX

IWANA B. TALL Seven Dwarfs State University

NEELAM KHER Northwestern State University of

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Louisiana

SUSAN MOLSTAD Northwestern State University of  
Louisiana

ROBERTA DONAHUE University of Alabama