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# HUMOR IN PEDAGOGY

## HOW HA-HA CAN LEAD TO AHA!

R. L. Garner

**Abstract.** Several studies have examined the pedagogical implications and cautions concerning the use of humor in teaching. Humor has been associated with a host of positive physiological and psychological effects. Researchers have identified that educators who use humor in their instruction are more positively rated by their peers and their students; others have suggested that humor may enhance learning. Although much of this evidence has been anecdotal, the present study assesses the impact of curriculum-specific humor on retention and recall, as well as student evaluations of the course and the instructor. The appropriate use of humor in a classroom setting is discussed and cautions against tendentious humor are addressed.

A number of articles have alluded to the benefits of humor in teaching (Berk 1998; Glenn 2002; Hill 1988; Pollio and Humphreys 1996). The pedagogical use of humor has been shown to have both psychological and physiological effects on learners. Psychologically, the effects of humor and laughter have been shown to reduce anxiety, decrease stress, enhance self-esteem, and increase self-motivation

(Berk 1998). Glenn (2002) suggests that humor can help an individual engage the learning process by creating a positive emotional and social environment in which defenses are lowered and students are better able to focus and attend to the information being presented. Additionally, humor can serve as a bridge between educators and students by demonstrating a shared understanding and a common psychological bond.

Physiologically, humor and laughter can aid learning through improved respiration and circulation, lower pulse and blood pressure, exercise of the chest muscles,

greater oxygenation of blood, and the release of endorphins into the bloodstream (Berk 1998). In his book, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*, Norman Cousins (1991) strongly touts the healing effects of laughter and suggests that humor can reduce anxiety, help relieve stress, and increase mental sharpness—all desirable things in pedagogical settings.

Civikly (1986) concludes that there is a growing body of research relating the use of humor and its positive effect on teaching and learning. Students indicate that humor can increase their interest in learning, and research has demonstrated that students who have teachers with a strong orientation to humor tend to learn more. According to Dodge and Rossett (1982), humor as a pedagogical tool can initiate and sustain student interest and provide a means to engage in divergent thinking. Ziv (1983, 1988) found that a humorous atmosphere in the classroom positively impacted student scores on divergent thinking exercises, and Korobkin (1989) indicated that college students report that learning is enhanced by the inclusion of instructionally-appropriate humor. Hill (1988) suggests that students will often have better recall of a message if it is presented with humor.

Several studies (see Berk 1996; Brown and Tomlin 1996; Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman 1997; Bryant et al. 1980; Pollio and Humphreys 1996) and my own observation as chair of a University Excellence in Teaching committee find that students appreciate and enjoy the use

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R. L. Garner is the associate dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas.  
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of humor in the classroom. A review of the teaching portfolios of highly-rated college faculty and faculty Web pages on the Internet frequently finds the use of humor listed as an important component of their teaching philosophy. College students asked to describe the positive attributes of good teachers frequently mention "sense of humor" (Brown and Tomlin 1996; Kelly and Kelly 1982).

Pollio and Humphreys (1996) found that the connection established between the instructor and the student was key to effective teaching. Lowman (1994) reported that effective college teachers were most often described as "enthusiastic," and a strong sense of humor plays a major role in developing a positive learning environment. Kher, Molstad, and Donahue (1999) suggest that teaching effectiveness is enhanced by the use of appropriate humor that fosters mutual respect, and humor increases student receptivity to material by reducing anxiety in dealing with difficult material and has a positive effect on test performance (Bryant et al. 1980). The positive environment of a humor-enriched lecture has even been shown to increase attendance in class (Devadoss and Foltz 1996; Romer 1993; White 1992).

Humor should be used cautiously, however, as it can be a potent medium for communication or a social impediment in pedagogical settings (Garner 2003). The use of humor can be complicated because it may be highly personal, subjective, and contextual and we cannot always predict the way it will be received. Things that one person might find humorous, ironic, or funny may be viewed by others as trite. Everyone has a unique perception as to what is humorous, so prudence should be the guiding principle. We identify what we call a "sense of humor" and like other senses, such as the sense of taste or smell, people have many different preferences (Garner 2003). Further, the effective use of humor is not akin to mere joke telling. Rhem (1998) found that some instructors with only average student evaluations used twice as much humor as those faculty members who were more highly rated. For humor to be most effective in an academic setting, it must be specific, targeted, and appropriate to the subject matter.

Given this background, the present study will explore the link between humor and learning. Much of the reported literature in this area suffers from a number of problems such as: (1) a limited number of participants; (2) a weak methodology; (3) primarily limited to elementary-aged children; or (4) is anecdotal in nature. This study will address some of these concerns by more carefully examining the relationship of humor as a pedagogical tool and its impact on learning and retention of information in a university setting. Measures of information recall, as well as satisfaction with the course, the instructor, and the delivery mechanism, will be assessed. Specifically, it is predicted that those in the humor group, as compared to the control group, will report higher general satisfaction ratings with the course and will retain more information over time.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 117 undergraduate students at a four-year university who volunteered to review three one-hour lectures presented in a distance-education format.

### *Materials/Instrumentation*

A series of three 40-minute lectures on the topic of research methods and statistics were recorded via Sony digital video equipment. The topic of statistics was chosen as students have often identified this as one of the "dreaded" courses in college. Researchers considered that if humor was an effective tool, it could find a strong alliance here. At the conclusion of each session, participants were asked to complete a brief survey to provide their assessment of the asynchronous video course delivery. (Asynchronous courses are designed so that students can cover the material at varying times and speeds, rather than synchronous delivery, which occurs at the same time for all class members.) Questions were presented in a 7-point Likert-type format and addressed topics relevant to the evaluation of the material (such as, what was your overall opinion of this lesson? How well do you believe it communicated the important information? What was your impression of the instructor? Compared to in-class instruction, how did you like the asynchronous video delivery?). This proce-

cedure was consistent with the purported purpose of the study. At the conclusion of the three lectures, all participants were asked to again rate their assessment of the asynchronous course delivery, and there was an additional exercise that required students to recall content that had been delivered over the three viewings.

### *Design and Procedure*

To preserve the main objective of the study, all participants were told only that they would be reviewing three hour-long sample lectures presented in an asynchronous distance education format. The participants were told that the university was considering implementing a new educational format for certain courses on campus, and they would be assisting in this process. Students were asked to review the material and were told that they would be asked to evaluate the delivery mode and the information presented at the conclusion of each session.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Both groups saw the same digitally video-recorded information on the topic of research methods and statistics presented by the same instructor. The humor group, however, saw a version of the lecture in which a humorous story, example, or metaphor had been inserted at the beginning of the lecture and at points approximately fifteen and thirty-five minutes into the lecture, depending on the content. (This was accomplished thanks to the media service technicians who produced a seamless video by "cutting" the humor segments into the control lecture videos.) As mentioned above, humor can be very subjective, so great care was exercised in the selection of the humorous material. The humor material was assessed by a group of academic judges to insure that the inset could be considered reasonably humorous, was appropriate in content, and was related to the material being covered. For example, in a segment on the reporting of research findings, the metaphorical joke about a planned escape by one of two prisoners in a desert jail was used. The story finds one prisoner trying to escape after unsuccessfully persuading the other to go with him, only learning—after breaking out—that escape was futile as there was sand in every direction for hun-

dreds of miles. After capture and return to the cell, the prisoner relates his story of the failed attempted escape. The other prisoner shares that he knew about the desert as he had also tried to escape a few years earlier. Incredulous, the first prisoner exclaimed, "You knew! Why didn't you tell me?" whereupon the other remarks, "Silly man, you should know that no one reports negative results." Although a bit "corny," the message makes the point and was well received by the student audience.

The inserts varied from less than a minute to approximately two minutes. As a result, the humor group's video presentation was slightly longer than the standard lecture group. Participants were allowed to sign up to view all three sessions over the period of fourteen days. This allowed inclusion of the greatest number of participants and provided the greatest latitude to participant's schedules. The final viewing included the evaluation and recall assessment exercise.

After the conclusion of the experiment and after all participants had completed the process of viewing and assessing the materials, subjects were debriefed via e-mail as to the additional purpose of the study and the preliminary results obtained.

## Results

Of the 117 subjects who originally agreed to be involved in the study, ninety-four participated to conclusion. This resulted in a sample of fifty-three females and forty-one males who were randomly assigned to condition. Only participants who completed all three sessions were included in the analysis. As a result, there were forty-two participants in the humor condition (from the originally assigned fifty-eight) and fifty-two participants in the control (from the originally assigned fifty-nine). There were no significant differences based on race or gender between groups. Analysis of variance revealed significant difference between the two groups with the humor condition having higher ratings for overall opinion of the lesson,  $F(1, 92) = 21.02, p < .001$ ; how well the lesson communicated the information,  $F(1, 92) = 54.86, p < .001$ ; and rating of the instructor,  $F(1, 92) = 43.33, p < .001$ . Most important to this research effort, subjects in the humor group signif-

icantly recalled and retained more information regarding the topic  $F(1, 92) = 73.81, p < .001$ . There was not a statistically significant difference in the rating of the video delivery mode as both groups rated it positively  $F(1, 92) = 3.72, p < .06$ . Descriptive statistics for all conditions can be found in table 1. The first four items found in the table address the 7-point Likert questions and the final item is the retention score based on a maximum value of 100.

## Discussion

As indicated above, the topic of research methods and statistics was chosen because students have identified this as one of the dreaded courses in college and a class in which humor could be a strong pedagogical tool. The results support the notion that humor can have a positive impact on content retention among a sample of college students. Although the use of the asynchronous video delivery might seem somewhat contrived, this approach was utilized for two reasons. First, more universities are moving to distance education and asynchronous modes of instructional delivery. As a result, the format was appropriate, especially given the explanation to the participants that this was an evaluation of this delivery design. Second, and more important, this approach allowed us to control for a myriad of subtle and not so subtle differences that could have been introduced by the lecturer—despite the best effort to do otherwise—if the presentations were live. This procedure insured a more consistent presentation and

enhanced methodological rigor across experimental conditions.

Although a content assessment after each session was possible, pilot testing determined that this might jeopardize the actual focus of the study and, because of the relatively small timeframe between viewing the first and third videos, multiple assessments of content could introduce unwanted bias (such as testing effects). Further, the end-of-video surveys presented at the conclusion of segments one and two were intentionally kept brief for this same reason.

The present study suggests that humor can have a positive effect on student enjoyment and content retention. The use of appropriate humor can facilitate a more relaxed atmosphere and provide a cognitive break that allows the student to assimilate the information (Korobkin 1989). The use of suitable, content-specific humorous examples may provide a student with a new perspective on the material that may lead to a novel cognitive insight (Ziv 1988).

Unfortunately, some educators believe their role or their topic is too serious to engage humor or view humor as merely a disruption. However, the use of appropriate humor in this study has been shown to enhance the learning environment and has a significantly positive impact on retention of educational materials in a real-world academic setting. Follow-up interviews with a random selection of participants reinforced the notion that the content-focused humor was helpful in comprehension of the material, made for a more enjoyable educational experience,

and created the impression that the instructor took the extra effort to get the message across. When properly used, humor can be an effective tool to make a class more enjoyable, reduce anxiety, and improve the learning setting. The “ha-ha” of humor in the classroom may indeed contribute to the “aha!” of learning from the student.

*Key words: humor, pedagogy, research*

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