

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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LAUGHTERPIECE THEATRE: Humor as a Systematic Teaching Tool

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Where do you start? It's like eating one of those dinosaurs from Jurassic Park. Once you forklift your filet of T-Rex off the grill, which is the size of Wyoming, where do you take your first bite? Tough decision.

There are buckets of research on the psychophysiological effects of humor and laughter (Berk, 2002, 2004a, 2004b; Martin, 2001). Direct links have also been established between multiple intelligence theory and research from cognitive/neuropsychology, education, commercial advertising, and communications with humor in the classroom (Berk, 1996, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2003; Berk & Nanda, 1998, in press; Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1998; Mehrabian, 1981). Evidence-based techniques are available. It is now time for YOU to take the first step (or 10th, if you're currently using humor) to produce humor in your classroom. No excuses. It is within every one of you to do this. In fact, I've even selected appropriate theme music for you to sing while you read this page: "We Can Do It," from the smash hit Broadway musical *The Producers*. If Max Bialystock and Leo Bloom can succeed as producers of "Springtime for Hitler" (a gay romp with Adolf and Eva at Berchtesgaden),

We can do it, we can do it.

We can do it, me and you.

We can do it, we can do it.

We can make our dreams come true.

First, let's discard the negative baggage you may still possess. Toss it out. If you tried a joke or funny story in class before and it bombed, fawgetaboutit. I had the same experience, but I kept doing it, only to be rejected over and over again. What was I thinking? Stand-up jokes are very difficult to execute effectively. It is so tempting to tell a joke you heard that was sooo funny. But few of us can deliver it the same way we heard it. So let's not think about our past joke-telling and failures.

Humor Incongruity Formula

Before proceeding with specific humor techniques, the underlying concept of the forms of humor described in this essay should be clear. It is called incongruity or contrast resolution—the juxtaposition of the "expected" with the "unexpected." For example, the one-liner is based on this structure: "Never raise your hand to your children; it leaves your midsection unprotected."

The expected element is the "serious" premise or set-up for the unexpected twist or punch line about our past joke-telling and failures.

Humor Delivered Orally

Most forms of humor that are longer than a one-liner and delivered orally contain three elements:

- Expected - serious set-up with commonly understood situation or content
- Expected - build-up of tension
- Unexpected Twist - punchline

This is the humor trifecta. All three elements are required for maximum winnings.

When students anticipate a joke is coming, clued by your set-up, body language, or bullhorn announcement, you have the benefit of building tension before delivering the punch. That build-up can affect the impact of the punchline. The delivery needs to be intentionally calculated with a pause just before the punchline. It needs to be practiced with anecdotes, multiple-choice format jokes, top 10 lists, or any other longer joke forms.

Humor in Print

In contrast to the above, "script humor" has no build-up of tension, no element 2. It's a bifecta, just expected followed by unexpected twist. The reader doesn't have a clue when the punch is coming. He or she is reading seriously (Is there any other way?), then, all of sudden, CRASH: the Miami SWAT Team barrels through your front door with a humongous battering ram, guns-a-blazing. This is quite a surprise because you live in North Dakota. Anyway, back to the sentence somewhere above. As you're reading, all of a sudden, you're smacked with a punch of some kind, right in the labonza (which is anatomically located just below the right hernia).

The punchline is the point of collision between two conflicting trains of thought: serious sentence meets unexpected ending. The shock is our recognition of this incongruity. There is virtually no opportunity to warn the reader. The only exception is a multipanel cartoon, where each panel builds tension—bubble after bubble -- toward the final panel punch.

There are 10 basic strategies that can be used to infuse humor systematically into your teaching. They are briefly described in the next section. The strategies are categorized by level of risk: low, moderate, and high. The lowest level involves inserting punchlines into your normal print material. The moderate- and high-risk categories rely on oral delivery.

Ten Humor Strategies

Low Risk Humor Strategies

1. Humorous Material on Syllabus

- Incongruous descriptors under course title
- Humorous prerequisites
- Fictitious instructor credentials
- Outrageous office hours
- Bizarre teaching methods

2. Descriptors, Cautions, and Warnings on the Cover of Handouts

- Incongruous descriptors under the title
- Cautions and Warnings

3. Humorous Problems/Assignments

Use humorous real or hypothetical situations in your assignments

- In-class and out-of-class
- Individual and small group (especially active/cooperative learning tasks)
- Problem-solving exercises, games, etc.

4. Humorous Material on Tests

- Incongruous descriptor under the title
- Jocular inserts in directions
- Humorous note on last page
- Humor in the test items
- Content-irrelevant strategies
- Content-relevant strategies

Moderate Risk Humor Strategies

5. Humorous Questions

Punchline questions during Q & A sessions:

- Set-up: Ask question
- Answer structure:
- How many of you think this is the correct decision/answer?
- How many of you think this is the correct decision/answer?
- Add one punch:
- How many of you don't care?
- How many of you don't like to be awakened during class?
- • How many of you are having evil thoughts about this problem?

6. Humorous Examples

Exaggerated, outrageous, and ridiculous examples in class:

- Hypothetical humorous problems or examples
- Real or hypothetical humorous case studies
- Humorous anecdotes based on previous experience
- Humorous names, cartoon characters, celebrity or students' names in examples

High Risk Humor Strategies

7. Opening Jokes

Forms of humorous material that can be delivered by you or your

students:

- Stand-up jokes
- Quotations, proverbs, and questions ("thought for the day")
- Cartoons
- Multiple-choice items
- Top 10 lists
- Anecdotes
- One-shot handouts (e.g., medications, letters, articles, memos)

8. Commercial Interruptions

When the students' eyeballs begin glazing over, stop for a commercial:

- Stand-up joke
- Anecdote
- Humorous handout (e.g., picture, cartoon)

9. Skits/Demonstrations with Music

- Dramatize theories, concepts, and processes (bring coma-inducing topics to "life")
- Role-play case studies – create a humorous hypothetical of "what NOT to do or say" to a patient, client, or parent
- Use music to introduce the demonstration

10. Game Format Test Review

- Jeopardy!

- Who Wants to be a Millionaire
- Weakest Link

Conclusion

These strategies are only a beginning. The use of humor to hook your students' attention and to foster that special professor-student interpersonal connection is limited only by your twisted mind and imagination. For detailed explanations of the strategies and a gazillion examples, see Berk (2002, 2003). The research on these techniques is also available to download from my Web site: www.ronberk.com.

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