

Higher Education Lecturing and Humor: From Perspectives to Strategies

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Received: June 15, 2015

Accepted: July 10, 2015

Online Published: September 17, 2015

doi:10.5539/hes.v5n5p26

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/hes.v5n5p26>

Abstract

This article will review the issues surrounding the use of humor as an informal teaching method in higher education lecturing. The impact and usefulness of humor, from both a teacher's and a student's perspective, will be investigated. The aim is to classify the challenges and limitations of using humor in classrooms and to investigate and categorize the strategies that have been put into practice in order to approach humor in lecturing. This could serve as a set of guidelines on if/how humor can be used to improve the overall learning experience in classrooms.

Keywords: humor, lecture, active learning, teaching strategies, teaching style

1. Introduction

Teaching in a university environment involves the most sophisticated form of lecturing. A university lecturer needs to instruct students on both theoretical and empirical subjects, while taking into account their varied backgrounds. In addition, a university lecturer needs to address the students' study skills and career trajectories in relation to specific disciplines (Hart, Waugh, & Waugh, 2000; Smeby 1996). In didactic subjects such as law or engineering, there is an emphasis on the transmission of concepts and principles, while in less informative disciplines, such as languages or fine arts, the emphasis is on the students' thoughts and participation (Becher, 1994).

Lecture, as the most practiced learning approach, has recently come under growing criticisms. Jones (2007) argues that lectures are often ineffective in engaging students and in creating an active and participatory learning environment. As a one-way informative method, lecturing could neglect the importance of peer-collaboration in effective learning. Lectures also tend to ignore the differences by which students learn, preventing a deep learning experience. Taking into account these limitations, some has envisaged a reduction in the use of lectures as a teaching tool (Jones, 2007).

However, such criticisms underestimate an important aspect of the lecture, which is viewing it as a form of performing art. Although lectures could become boring and confusing, they could also be inspiring, exciting, and stimulating for students. In this way, a lecture may serve as a constructive means of learning, where students are encouraged to actively participate in classroom activities (Brent, 2005). Jones (2007) points to the fact that balancing the serious aspects of teaching with the desires of students for excitement and inspiration is an appropriate way of creating a motivating and lively teaching environment, where lecturing is coupled with discussions and collaborative learning approaches. Morton (2009) lists five attributes of an outstanding lecture. She suggests the use of relevant techniques to construct an engaging environment, leaving students wondering where the time has gone. Evidence suggests that an enthusiastic lecturer, with a genuine interest in the subject, and with the capability of transmitting knowledge through narrative and informal methods, such as storytelling or humor, can generate and maintain interest and deep learning in students (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Morton, 2009).

Reflecting on the above benefits, this study will review and categorize the issues surrounding the use of humor as an informal method of teaching in higher education lecturing. Firstly, the impact and usefulness of humor, from both a teacher's and a student's perspective, will be investigated. This will be followed by a review of the challenges and limitations associated with the use of humor in classrooms. The paper concludes by summarizing

the strategies that have been put into practice in order to properly approach humor in lecturing, the lessons learned, and avenues for future research.

2. Humor in Lecturing: Perspectives

2.1 Teachers' Perspectives

The use of humor in teaching is a modern phenomenon. Until the 19th century, it was commonly believed that humor did not belong in the classroom, and that teaching was a solemn profession dealing only with serious issues. Nowadays, humor in teaching is regarded as an active learning strategy.

Humor has been cited as one of the essential characteristics of a good teacher (Hornig, Hong, ChanLin, Chang, & Chu, 2005). Powell and Andresen (1985) claim that humor is a valuable teaching tool with many benefits for teachers, as it could enhance learning by promoting comprehension and retention of information. Humor could also create a positive classroom environment and would indirectly help to trigger students' enthusiasm and interest. This in turn would increase students' involvement in class discussions and could also compensate for the general weakness of lectures in retaining students' attention. A passive, didactic lecture can only keep students focused for about 20 minutes or so (Stuart & Rutherford, 1978). The use of humor and other forms of engaging activities in classrooms can keep students' focus and interest for longer. This is a particularly critical issue in today's classrooms, with the presence of computers and mobile phones as a major source of distraction (Morton, 2009). As a creative way of communication, humor is believed to help improve the cognitive capabilities of both the teacher and the students.

It has been observed that humor can serve as a classroom management tool for teachers (Morton, 2009). Teachers often turn to humor to manage disruptive students and undesirable behavior in the classroom, such as chatting, tardiness etc. (Powell & Andersen, 1985). Mastering the appropriate use of humor in the classroom, and receiving positive learning feedback from it, is considered to be a confidence building step for new teachers. An obvious benefit of humor to teachers is its socio-psychological impact on a teacher's work and life. Teaching could be a stressful and sometimes unrewarding job. An informal and light-hearted relationship with students can make a lecture an uplifting, rewarding and relaxing experience for teachers. Although a common concern reported about using humor as a teaching method is the teachers' fear of losing respect and authority in classroom (Korobkin, 1988).

Reviewing the literature shows that empirical studies about teachers' perspectives on the use of humor in lecturing have been widely neglected. This is in contrary to the abundant literature, empirical research and surveys that exist about students' opinions on the use of humor in classrooms.

2.2 Students' Perspectives

The use of humor in the classroom is considered to be beneficial from a learner's perspective. Students are naturally open to occasional fun in class. A teacher's sense of humor is often identified as an effective learning strategy in student surveys (Bryant, Comisky, & Zillman, 1979). Humor can bridge the gap between the teacher and the students by putting students at ease (Baid & Lambert, 2010). Such an atmosphere is expected to increase students' interest and motivation towards course activities. A positive attitude can foster peer collaboration, which in turn increases class productivity and learning (Korobkin, 1988). Powell and Andersen (1985) also underline the more general impact of humor in enhancing the quality of students' life during their university years and beyond.

A number of empirical studies have been conducted in order to investigate the above claims. Garner (2006) surveyed 117 undergraduate students on a distance learning course on research methods and statistics. He divided them into two groups, with similarities in terms of race and gender. For the first group of 58 students, humor was occasionally used during teaching sessions. The second group experienced a controlled environment with no intentional humor. The groups' overall opinions about the course; communication effectiveness, instructor performance, and knowledge retention, were compared. The analysis of the data regarding these aspects of the course revealed a statistically meaningful difference between the two groups. The group where humor was used as a teaching method outperformed the other group on all the aforementioned aspects.

A three-year study of three undergraduate and five graduate introductory courses at John Hopkins University captures student opinion on various strategies for using humor in classrooms (Berk, 1996). The top ten most effective strategies were identified and ranked as (1) humorous material on course syllabus; (2) humorous material on the covers of hand-outs; (3) opening jokes; (4) humorous stories; (5) spontaneous humor; (6) humorous questions; (7) humorous examples; (8) humor in the definition of problems; (9) humorous games; and (10) humorous material on exams. More than half of these strategies are directly related to a teacher's capability

of incorporating humor in lectures.

A critical issue from the students' perspective is the fact that many humorous situations created by teachers in classrooms are neither related to course content nor useful to their learning. A survey of 284 undergraduate students in an introductory communication course revealed that in 42% of cases humor was inappropriately used in class (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006). This category of humor was comprised of offensive humor (30%), disparaging humor targeting students (42%), disparaging humor targeting other subjects (27%) and self-deprecating humor, where a teacher makes fun of him/herself. On the appropriate spectrum, just around 58% of cases were considered instructional/course related humor.

3. Lecturing and Humor: Challenges

Despite the aforementioned beneficial aspects, literature highlights many challenges associated with the use of humor in lecturing. A critical issue is the danger for teachers to be amusing rather than helpful. The research on use of humor in lecturing points to a fine line between purposefully engaging humor and irrelevant comedy (Baid & Lambert, 2010). The latter can lead to students being falsely satisfied without/or with little instructional achievements. There is a famous experiment conducted by Naftulin, Ware and Donnelly (1979) in which an actor was hired to give an amazing but irrelevant and empty lecture to a group of students. Despite these arrangements, the results of students' surveys showed that a majority of them felt that they learned a lot from the lecture.

The other challenge is the lack of sufficient empirical research on how humor helps in teaching. In fact, the number of studies exploring positive impacts of humor in teaching is still limited. Ziegler (1998) emphasizes the significant difference between the amount of theoretical literature claiming the usefulness of humor in medical teaching and the number of studies actually reporting on those benefits.

In addition, if used inappropriately, humor can create a hostile environment and triggering a sense of mistrust in students and reduce their self-esteem (Baid & Lambert, 2010). The communication channels with students might be lost and the class could become less worthwhile from the students' perspective. When the humor has culturally inappropriate elements or if the humor is used as an act of bullying, the lecture will be reduced to a biased, racist, sexist or unprofessional experience (Saltman, 1995). Also, there is the possibility of humor being misused by teachers as a last resort to gain control of a class. In this situation, humor is reportedly used to target a particular student or a group of them as a way of relieving the stress and disorder in the classroom (Powell & Andersen, 1985).

Furthermore, there is a real challenge with respect to realizing what is humorous and if/how humor would be perceived differently by different groups of students in class (Korobkin, 1988). Nowadays, this issue is of particular importance with increasing internationalization and diversity in university classrooms. Some students could be strangers to humor in class due to cultural differences. Teachers have to be aware of the unintended interpretations and consequences of humor.

Consequently, addressing these issues would put an extra burden on teacher education systems. It has to train interested teaching staff on the best strategies of incorporating and managing humor in classrooms. This category of training should highlight the fact that being humorous in class is not equivalent to using jokes and is not necessarily going to result in laughter. As a first attempt, Adamle, Chiang-Hanisko, Ludwick, Zeller, & Brown (2007) surveyed about the inclusion of humor in the curriculum and on how faculty can be provided with training on use of humor in classrooms. They concluded that these training programs should embrace the fact that not every lecturer is comfortable with using humor in class. As such, it would be useful to review and identify a set of strategies that could be used by lecturers to realize how to include humor, what type of humor to include, and how much humor to include in teaching, and in particular what type of humor (and what topics) should be avoided.

4. Lecturing and Humor: Strategies

For teachers, there are many questions (ex. why humor? when to use it? what to do? how to do it?) to address before deciding to use humor in classrooms. Firstly, there should be a clear instructional rationale and pedagogical purpose for using humor, arising either from the subject being taught or from the atmosphere in the classroom (Skinner, 2001). This could be as simple as reducing stress on students, which could be extremely high in some classrooms depending on the subject of the lecture, the class environment, and the type of activities expected from the students (Moran & Hughes, 2006).

There are plenty of ways to inject humor into lecturing. Games and group activities could be added to teaching strategies. In general, meaningful, in-class games can improve critical thinking, debate and discussion skills, and abilities in problem-solving and working as a team (Baid & Lambert, 2010). This is in line with constructivist

ideas and learning theories in which the teacher is not just a transmitter of knowledge, but a leader in the process of learning while the students play an active role in the creation of their own understanding (Biggs, 1996). The availability of multiple teaching technologies such as PowerPoint presentations, graphics, animations and films, and internet audios/videos can help enhance the usefulness of humor in lecturing by targeting various channels of learning (Eskicioglu & Kopec, 2003).

By enhancing a teacher's grasp of learning strategies and personal communication skills, they would be more at ease and are better positioned to use humor in lecturing. More importantly, evidence shows that if humor is gradually used in teaching through careful planning, even those teachers with no natural sense of humor can manage to deliver it well (Korobkin, 1988). The big difference between humor in comedy and humor in teaching is that the latter is not usually original humor. Teachers widely collect and use humorous material created elsewhere. That is why the use of humor in lecturing involves learnable skills, while humor in comedy needs a natural sense and ability. Therefore, the most critical step towards using humor in teaching is for teachers to get to know a variety of humorous material and its popularity and acceptability. In this sense, teachers should be well informed on how to properly reference the humorous works of others (Hellman, 2007). Similar to acquiring other teaching skills, teachers can rely on observations and feedback from their colleagues or teaching development staff to assess the impact and usefulness of humorous material used in their lectures (Powell & Andersen, 1985).

Civikly (1986) suggests a list of seven questions to bear in mind when considering the use of humor in lecturing. These questions cover teachers' philosophical views on teaching in general and on humor in particular, their composure in class, with or without humorous situations, and their knowledge of existing humorous material on the subject of teaching. He concludes that humor is not the right prescription for every lecturer, and those willing to use it should have a positive view about it and be willing to spend time and energy to adopt this new way of teaching.

5. Conclusions

This article explored the most commonly cited issues related to the incorporation of humor in lecturing. The literature on this subject is still not sufficiently developed, especially when it comes to teachers' issues and perspectives. Moreover, there is little empirical research about the role of humor in improving students' learning. The existing theoretical and empirical literature emphasizes the fact that humor is not the right prescription for every teacher, every classroom, and every teaching subject, and it should be pursued carefully. Even if accepted as a useful technique, the injection of humor into lectures has been proven to be challenging. If not used purposefully and in line with instructional objectives, humor might be reduced to a means of amusement for students with no learning outcomes. Maintaining the balance between the choice of humor and the type of audience is another delicate task for teachers. This has become of particular importance due to increasing diversity in students with respect to cultural and professional backgrounds. Promoting the use of humor in teaching also poses new challenges for teacher training programs. Teachers need to acquire a set of skills on how to collect humorous materials, and how to use them appropriately in classrooms. In addition, most of the studies reported in the literature are the experiments conducted by teachers in a limited number of classes offered in specific subjects such as research methods or statistics. There is a clear need to more comparative studies exploring diverse classrooms and teaching subjects to provide wider evidence on the usefulness of humor as well as the best strategies to adopt it in lecturing.

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