The Role of Humor in Enhancing the Classroom Climate

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THE ROLE of humor for engaging interactions has been the focus of much research in past decades. Humor can be used effectively as a means to increase student involvement and has a positive effect on the learning process.1 Additionally, humor facilitates the retention of novel information,2 increases learning speed, and improves problem solving.3 Humor has also been found to be useful in facilitating attention, motivation,4,5,6 and comprehension.3 The incorporation of humor is encouraged across all academic disciplines and can be used as a powerful tool to put students at ease and make the overall learning process more enjoyable.7

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief overview of humor as an instructional tool and describe how humor can be utilized as a learner-centered strategy in a classroom setting.

Humor as an Instructional Tool

The technique of using humor in the classroom dates back to an ancient Babylonian Talmud. Rabbah, a Talmudic sage who lived 1700 years ago, would say something humorous to his scholars prior to his lecture; they would laugh and Rabbah would begin his lessons of the day.8 Humor broadly defined is communication that elicits laughter or leads to a feeling of amusement.8 It is not limited to jokes or humorous stories; rather, it can include props, puns, short stories, anecdotes, riddles, or cartoons. Humor can be anything that creates a positive feeling in students. When used correctly, humor should be memorable and capture students’ attention on the subject at hand.

Humor can serve a variety of goals for the college instructor. It has been used successfully to communicate implicit classroom rules, fostering greater understanding and rapport between the instructor and students. This leads to a clearer comprehension of classroom management issues.9 The thoughtful use of humor by instructors can contribute to teaching effectiveness. Research indicates that students learn more from teachers who use humor in the classroom.10,11

Guidelines for Implementing Humor

How do you know what humor is right for you and your students? When can you safely use humor as an instructional tool? Although humor can be an effective leaning tool, instructors must understand their role and feel comfortable using humor (see sidebar). Humor can be integrated into the classroom in such a way that fosters a sense of openness and respect between students and teachers. Toro and colleagues12 asserted that humor has a humanizing effect on the image of instructors. Using humor can help students realize that

Instructor’s Role When Using Humor

• Smile/be light hearted.
• Be spontaneous/natural.
• Foster an informal climate/be conservational and loose.
• Encourage a “give and take” with your students.
• Explore your inner self.
instructors have feelings, are human, and are part of the classroom learning community. For example, how often do instructors laugh at their mistakes? Laughing at their own mistakes or sharing humorous stories about themselves helps with this humanizing process.

The essence of using humor is to “hook” the students through active engagement into the lesson. Humor that promotes teaching is considered “constructive humor” and permits students to gain meaning from an activity where humor was utilized. For example, an instructor may begin class with a YouTube video of an extreme sport event that illustrates a mountain biker falling and sustaining a fractured forearm. The lesson following this video could provide a discussion or problem-solving assignment focused on how to either prevent or manage the injury. Therefore, the humor of the video was used as a constructive activity where students laughed but were actively engaged in a purposeful lesson.

Prior to using humor, an instructor needs to consider the following: (a) subject, (b) intent, (c) tone, and (d) situation. Some subjects are exciting, while others are more challenging to teach. Medical terminology can be a dry topic for many students; however, if students were provided with an opportunity to act out the terms or create a story or poem using a group of words, developing an understanding of medical terms would become more fun. By utilizing a bit of humor and creativity, even the driest of subjects can be brought to life.

Remember that the intent of adding humor to a lesson is to facilitate learning. Humor should be purposeful and related to the outcome of the lesson. As previously stated, humor can be utilized as an introduction or closing to the topic of the day. For example, a cartoon illustrating health insurance reform in the United States is used to open the class. A dialogue of health insurance reform follows. To close the lesson, students are assigned to groups and are instructed to develop their own political cartoon to best illustrate their understanding of health insurance reform. The general outcome of this lesson was for students to introduce and discuss health insurance reform. Using humor as bookends to the lesson grabs the students’ attention to start a discussion and allows for a creative ending.

Although the purpose of humor is to elicit laughter and relieve anxiety, it must be used cautiously. The tone in which humor is delivered can affect how it is received by students. Instructors delivering humor through insult or sarcasm may defeat the intent of the humor. It should never be used at the expense of students (see sidebar).

The last factor to consider when using humor is the situation. Before using humor, instructors need to determine the situation for which humor is being considered. Is humor being used to change student behaviors, to address classroom communication, to develop assignments, to transition from one topic to another, or to enhance the understanding or purpose of any topic or activity? Many instructors have experienced students using cell phones while in class. The next time you see a student text messaging during class, try this strategy: Imitate a text being received on your own cell phone. Teaching stops, students look at the instructor answering the text, instructor returns text to sender, instructor pauses, some students smile/laugh, and the use of cell phones is discussed. This strategy provides for a nonthreatening environment to discuss why cell phones are not to be used during class and has a hint of humor as the instructor imitates the student.

Here is an example using a story to address communication skills when directing a student to perform a skill. The athletic trainer for softball asks an athletic training student to put the shortstop in a cold whirlpool for an ankle injury. Ten minutes later the athletic trainer walks over to the whirlpool and it is not on. The athlete is soaking her ankle in the calm water. The athletic trainer failed to instruct the student to turn the whirlpool on while treating the athlete.

**Summary**

We all know the connection established between the instructor and the student is a key to effective teaching. Successful college instructors are most often described as enthusiastic, and a strong sense of humor can play a major role in developing this enthusiasm. Teachers are powerful role models and as such can use