Examining the Do's and Don'ts of Using Humor in the Online Classroom

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Abstract: Integrating the use of humor into online classroom environments has many benefits for both the professor and students. Humor has gained recognition as a tool to help individuals cope and experience therapeutic value; however, the use of humor in online courses by instructors is often contemplated but rarely applied. Presenters with extensive experience teaching online will engage participants in interactive questions and guided handouts. The pros and cons of humor online will be the focus. Questions for self reflection by instructors when using humor are posed for further consideration. Recognizing that the continuum of what is humorous is highly variable is key with essential considerations to language, context, and culture. Integrated research will be shared to highlight these factors. Appropriate teacher humor and the potential legal and ethical issues will be explored. This paper will also examine how to effectively use humor in the online classroom and also discuss what to avoid including possible liability for libel and copyright violations.

Introduction

Humor is by far the most significant activity of the human brain. -- Edward De Bono (Moncur, n.d.a)

Although humor is often resigned to the comic strip section of the daily newspaper, college instructors and students have much to gain by integrating humor into a curriculum and into the online classroom itself. If humor is truly the "most significant activity of the human brain" as claimed by De Bono, to leave it out of the classroom would be a huge error on the part of instructors (Moncur, n.d.a). How can online instructors integrate humor into their classrooms? How can humor be used to further course learning objectives and foster critical thinking? This paper will examine these issues as well as possible instructor pitfalls such as forgetting to reference sources when citing a joke and posting about cultural or location-specific humor that some students may not understand.

What is the value of Humor in the human experience?

Humor creates a type of release evoking psychological, emotional and physiological change. In turn this can afford further perception of self and environment towards a more healthy perspective (Maples et al., 2001). Humor provides a chance to adopt a new view or existential "lens" to find new meaning on a situation. In some ways it reduces a sense of one's own struggles in isolation and furthers connecting communally. Norman Cousins the editor of *The Saturday Review* for over 30 years, authored *Anatomy of an Illness*. When diagnosed with a chronic illness, he read humorous stories and watched Marx Brothers movies. In 1989, it was finally acknowledged in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) that laughter therapy could help improve the quality of life for patients with chronic illness and that laughter has an immediate symptom relieving effect (Read-Brown, 2009). Corey (2009) notes that one should never forget we can laugh, especially at ourselves. A sense of humor can go a long way towards the obvious breaking the ice and getting interactions moving in a positive direction between counselor or counselee (in some cases) and with professor and student. Corey (2009) also states that "Both client and counselors can enrich a relationship through humor" (p. 32). However, a therapist needs to distinguish between humor that distracts and humor that enhances the situation.

Past studies of humor and work have found humor to be both functional and dysfunctional for various settings, groups, and individual workers (Mauldin, 2008). Mauldin's research analyzing humor in work settings and the particular content found that: 1) the content of humor reflects the concerns of different social groups and 2) that the level of alienation experienced by individual workers while related to the structure of work, is subject to factors which can affect reporting. The researchers performed a content analysis coding jokes and humor as empowerment, understanding, self-actualization, social isolation, self-estrangement, or general humor. Overall this study offered a way of assessing group sentiments on humor and alienation which is important for prospective researchers who might approach researching online student's reactions to humor and jokes.

Use of Humor in pedagogy (online and traditional settings) and counseling

Corey (2006) a key contributor to the field of counseling noted the appropriate use of humor in counseling as a potential strategy for helping Clients place events of their lives into manageable perspective. Livingston (2004) affirmed, "Of all the forms of courage, the ability to laugh is the most profoundly therapeutic." He also notes "laughter is a type of sharing—we are all in this lifeboat together. The sea surrounds us; rescue is uncertain; control is illusory—still we sail on together (p.156)." This existential nature of humor has been widely depicted in more fatalistic types of humor on the human condition.

Frymier et. al (2007) examined student perceptions of inappropriate and appropriate teacher humor. The findings confirmed that student's perceptions of appropriate use of humor in the online class by teachers are largely influenced by their own communication disposition. For example, those students who communicate well are more sensitive and responsive to others and therefore forecast what might be ill received. Moreover, students did not perceive inappropriate humor (sarcasm) as appropriate even when a categorized funny teacher used the examples in online teaching. They also found that verbally aggressive students view the borderline and risky types of humor as being more appropriate. Student personality characteristics also seemed to affect how appropriate they rate types of teacher humor use. Overall findings confirmed that teachers' using certain humor is correlated to the way the teacher acts in the classroom and in turn, how students evaluate their humor usage.

In a study by Berk and Nanda (2006), employing one of the most rigorous experimental designs found that humor in test directions can significantly increase test performance, particularly on constructed-response problem-solving items. The authors also found that "humor in course tests may be worthy of consideration because it was found to pose no harm to performance and self report studies found students preferred it" (p. 446).

Another study by Garner (2006) affirmed that humor can have an impact on content retention among a sample of college students in online courses. Through follow up interviews with participants this article reinforced the finding that humor used online created the perception of extra effort to make the course enjoyable, allaying some anxiety and improving the learning session. According to McGuire (2009) therapists who use humor are also encouraged to take care of its use in working with client. "Something is beginning to catch on," says Dunn, a psychotherapist in Jackson, Miss., and publisher of the monthly newsletter *Humor & Health*. "Humor is woven into the fabric of life, as are tragedy and suffering," says Dunn (McGuire, 2009?). "So, helping people realize they have the freedom to laugh--not trying to make them laugh, but inviting it--can make a point and serve a therapeutic purpose. But I don't try to be a stand up comic (p. 1)." Another therapist interviewed interviewed by McGuire noted "We're trying to help people problem-solve, to develop, to know they're alive. These are things that humor does."

Humor: Implications in diverse learning settings

It's also essential to examine humor through the lenses of a multi-cultural context. Parameters and basic guidelines of using humor vary with individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. For example, Achter (2008) noted that comedy has a special role in helping societies manage crisis moments, and the U.S. media paid considerable attention to the proper role of comedy in public culture after the 9/11 tragedies. In reaction to this, a panel was formulated to discuss this issue with a variety of media, whether online, in

newspapers or news magazines, in films, in music, or in standup. Thus even those with expertise and proficiency in using humor in societal outlets move prudently in its application within certain issues, subjects, contexts, and situations.

Individual Differences Prevail

Humor is interpreted, perceived, defined, and valued differently by various cultures. It is important that online teachers and counselors consider the individual cultural values of the student(s) they are working with online. Bell (2007) confirms that the recognition of humor is a dynamic construct, always changing and developing as individuals are exposed to new forms of humor, with different conversational styles as well. This research also emphasizes that no speech community is homogeneous, so even two native speakers of a language can encounter in each other culturally different ways of speaking. The authors of this article have developed a checklist of considerations for instructors teaching online to consider in Table 1.

Table 1. Questions for Instructors to Consider prior to using Humor Online

Questions for Self Reflection	
What degree of traditionalism exists of individuals in the course towards culture? For the organization? For the individual student? (For example, some environments might be more conservative than others.)	What is the purpose for using humor in online teaching or counseling? Is it related to a key construct in the course that will lead towards further attainment of the learning objectives and critical thinking?
What is the degree of acculturation to the mainstream or dominant culture amongst the group? Have I taken into consideration individual learners and their acculturation to assure they won't feel left out in not understanding a humorous passage, story, cartoon, or vignette?	Have you as an instructor developed trust and respect in the online environment? What evidence do you have of this as observed in student behaviors?
Consider the timing- or even query if the students are interested in a humorous story or cartoon to elaborate the point (ask permission).	Think about times when humor was used in your own life and its application. Perhaps, a job interview— to make you feel comfortable; a doctor's visit to reassure your nerves; or a cartoon or humorous story shared to show an example that can help one's efficacy in starting a

	new task or learning
Does the humor have universality in the course I am teaching?	Does the humorous sharing need prefacing or further context explanation? Will the humorous interjection or cartoon affirm overcoming difficulties in the course or any mistakes that can happen in some way learning online?

Having a sense of humor may help put life in perspective (Corey, 2009). However it isn't always a necessary tool in helping a person overcome obstacles. To show a sense of humor in a professional setting should be eased into when taking into consideration the fact that we all will be helping people from a multi-cultural standpoint. One culture might view humor and laughing as an important part of the healing process while the next three cultures might find it offensive and disrespectful.

Global & U.S. Regional studies on the Use of humor

Chen and Martin (2007) studied humor styles, coping humor, and mental health between Chinese and Canadian university students. In both the Chinese and Canadian students younger participants reported more use of affiliative and aggressive humor than older students. Withstanding global studies on humor differences, Romero et. al (2007) affirmed that significant differences exist in humor across regions in the U.S. In the U.S. the authors found that overall men seem to use more humor than women; younger people use more humor than adults (confirming Chen et. al's findings). The researchers found that the effect of education intervenes, in that those with masters degrees scored higher on self-enhancing and coping humor, while high school graduates scored highest on attitudes towards humor. In terms of demographics, the distinctive pattern of humor was revealed in the self report measures with implications that humor awareness training can help a manager or firm realize the positive benefits associated with humor use while avoiding conflict and misunderstanding when humor is used inappropriately (Chen and Martin, 2007).

Instructor's level of functioning and humor

What about instructor qualities and humor? Tumkaya (2007) confirmed there is small relationship between burnout, aggressive humor, and self defeating humor in university lecturers. Humor and the extent of its use was overall the most powerful predictor of lecturer burnout in this research. As such humor might be more of a litmus test revealing aspects of instructor career development, in this case negatively. Thus centrally this even implies that those department chairs, evaluators or other entities observing online courses might have an awareness of humor as both a tool or a predictor (as in this research) of the potential prospective functioning of the instructor, lecturer, or professor. Fortune, Shifflett and Sibley (2006) found no differences amongst students taking an online or face to face course in terms of their perception of skill development. Actions the authors noted include "the instructor sharing personal experiences and humor, addressing students by name, and providing feedback in real-time or with online instant messages" (p. 213). Bell (2007) affirms that while research has begun to approach the production of humor in interaction with sociolinguistic and ethnographic lenses, more research needs to be done on the processing and understanding of humor overall.

Do's: How to effectively use humor in the online classroom

Humor in lectures such as jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments, and other humorous items builds a bond between the instructor and students, or, more so, bridges the student-teacher gap, by allowing students to view the instructor as more approachable. Professors have discovered a number of creative ways to incorporate humor in classes such as cartoons, top ten lists, comic verses, and phony or bogus experiments, all of which break the ice and open the door of friendly learning.

Humor modifies the student-instructor interface and, often makes it friendlier, more learner-centered; and, that's a good thing. Students taking online courses often view the courses as "distant," boring, and impersonal. Two Ohio University professors, Shatz and Helitzer's *Comedy Writing Secrets* (2005) began with an experiment of student engagement in discussion threads based on humor. In the limited study by Shatz and LoSchaivo (2006) of 43 students in an online class (half with humor, half without) found that those in a "humor-enhanced" instruction were more likely to be active and post in the discussion board.

As Shatz and LoSchaivo (2006) confirm in their writing, humor is more of a social lubricant to facilitate interactions through a combination of increased participation, course involvement, and course performance. The "educational purpose of the humor is the most important consideration." (p. 7) In fact, it is important to remember that the objective is not to make students laugh, but to help them learn, and if humor can make the learning process more enjoyable, then both the instructor and the students benefit.

Lovorn (2009, in Frederick) notes, "humor is not for entertainment's sake; it is for engagement's sake." It is a win-win situation. Goldsmith (2001) had similar findings on the value of humor in the classroom.

Preliminary Research Findings

In some preliminary research with 109 students in four online criminal justice courses, this author has received very supportive student responses concerning humor in the classroom. 100 percent of respondents felt that humor can facilitate interactions.. For example, when a student posted an assignment in the wrong area of the course, commenting arrgh, one of the authors of this article attached a cartoon of Charlie Brown. The cartoon vignette was titled arrgh! Featured is Lucy, one of the characters, taking away the football from Charlie Brown at the last moment when he was ready to kick the ball. The students posted after this saying, this was great and even showed empathy in noting hang in there or mistakes happen. Ninety to Ninety-nine percent felt that humor can add a sense of flavor to the class experience, relieve stress, and improve student attention; enhance learning, influence student interest and participation, augment teaching; allow students to view the instructor as more approachable; and , promote course objectives.

The students were provided various course-related humor throughout the term. Ironically, one of those is a 'top ten list" (much like David Letterman's nightly list. For the senior seminar, that requires writing and defending a thesis, the list contains progressively painful things that students would rather do than take the senior seminar. Number two on the list is : Being attacked by a roving pack of Rottweilers. During week two (before students realize the gravity and work of the thesis process) students have commented that the list is funny. By the end of week seven, the Rottweilers don't seem like a bad alternative.

There will be an expanded sample to this research in the near future. The preliminary results are both validating of past research and encouraging for the incorporation of humor in the classroom. Humor can prompt various course objectives and, in so doing (and additionally) increase student interest and attention, improve the student-teacher relationship, and aid the student's retention of a concept. One of the writers of this article vividly recalls the face-to-face (F2F) statistics class that was attended in 1977 under the tutelage of Dr. Doug Zahn (professor statistics, Florida State University), who made probability interesting and funny by sometimes self-deprecating jokes (though we all knew that he was "THE stats MAN") and comical, humorous lectures related to complicated statistical concepts.

The use of humor in online classes has been largely ignored as a truly pedagogical tool (Askildson, 2001. This is due mainly to the stricter, more structured format of online

courses. (Shatz and LoSchiavo, 2006) However, for many virtual instructors, humor has been found to be a catalyst for online learners (Wanzer, et al,2006). Additionally, research has shown that the use of humor is conducive to adult learning and as a motivation for the adult learner to embrace data and concepts.(Findley & Varble, 2006) And, as we know, today's online learner is composed mainly of adult learners(Allen & Seaman, 2009).

Considerations in Using Humor in Instruction

Appropriate and timely humor in the college classroom can foster mutual openness and respect and contribute to overall teaching effectiveness (Kher, et al, 1999). Humor creates an inviting classroom environment. Research has shown that students believe that humor relieves stress, improves attention, and enhances learning. (Shatz and LoSchiavo, 2006) In fact, most of the findings in this area support that the use of humor as an instructional strategy. (pg. 3)The process for using humor in college teaching has only just begun.

 The student population of online students ranging between Generation X and Generation Y are more techno-savvy and expect (and demand) more entertainment and gadgetry, to include humor (Smith, 2008). Many online instructors either do not have the advanced techno-skills or do not go out of their way to find and use humorous material in their courses. (pg. 1)They have found that it simply takes extra planning and effort to make humor happen in online classes.

Instructors who are pressed for time find that it takes more time to be humorous than it takes to just get the job done. For individual instructors that teach an occasional and/or single-section course online, this trend will most likely continue. However, for those institutions with course development teams and instructional course developers responsible for multiple-section courses, there can be an expectation for growth in humor.

Research Validation for Using Humor in Learning Environments

Research has validated that there are many benefits in the classroom, to include: creating a supportive learning environment; building a sense of community; and knowledge retention (Kher, et al, 1999). It is important that in order for humor (or comedy) to be effective, it must complement, and not distract, from course material (Shatz & LoSchiavo, 2006). Research has also shown that instructors who utilize either distracting or inappropriate humor can actually interfere with student's learning. (pg. 4) Further research validated that when classroom humor is used effectively, it can improve student performance by reducing anxiety, boosting participation, increasing student recall, and increasing students' motivation to focus on material. Likewise, Lovorn (2009) found that humor is effective for increasing student involvement, retention of information, and making difficulty subjects more enjoyable.

HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT the instructional designer who walks into a bar?

And sits down between the criminologists …….. and the Rabbi? No? Perhaps that's because there's not enough humor in our field. Think about the field of criminal justice. There are cop jokes, prison jokes, lawyer jokes, judge jokes, Bad Boy weekly shows, Judge Judy, Judge Mathis, Judge, etc., etc. When they make a mistake, it is news. When they make a mistake that is funny, it is the news and *humor*-fodder for a long time. Likewise, current events are converted to humor nightly by such comedians as Leno, Letterman, Colbert, and Dailey.

While most online instructors will certainly not have the knack or flair to both teach and perform a learning, comedy-routine for the dual benefit of learning and humor; they will have access to their material in written, audio, or visual form. When selecting or preparing humor for the online course, do so with the educational purpose of the humor as the most important consideration (Shatz and LoSchiavo, 2006). In contrast to comedians, who gauge success by laughter, or the TV producers that gauge success by audience markets, educators measure the effectiveness of humor by how it promotes learning.

Further Student Demographic Considerations

The demographic makeup of courses is different (especially online) in age groups, racial groups, religious backgrounds, occupations, and political background. It is important to be prepared to be flexible in your humor (Shatz and LoSchiavo, 2006). You may have to consider some "new" material. One way I would advise to do this assessment is require that students introduce themselves to the class and provide specific information in their introductions. You learn a good deal from these introductions which may save you embarrassment later in the course.

Knowing your learners will allow you to garner your internal (and external) human resources. You may then mold humor to fit the audience and the situation. You may apply humor to your subject matter and, at the same time, avoid offending others with your humor. It is important to ensure that students are not acceptable targets for humor and to be fully cognizant that any such humor will be present within the course and on the Internet in the future. Any and all humor needs to be created and/or "borrowed" from others with full awareness that there are no softening devices; that is, the voice, inflection, timing, and gestures available in the F2F classroom are not available. Students may or may not read humorous messages or content at the same time, and it may lose a little in the time and space translation.

Confirming an Educational Purpose

In applying humor to your subject matter, the educational purpose of the humor is the most important consideration. As a pedagogical device, humor can promote various objectives. (Shatz and LoSchiavo, 2006) Humor may increase your student's interest and attention. You may use humor to facilitate the relationship with your students. You may simply provide students with a "comic relief" from the course, or you may wish to promote the understanding and retention of a concept. It is very important that instructors keep the focus on learning. The effectiveness of humor should be measured by the promotion of learning that results. Humor can measure students' enjoyment with a course, but, most important is the instructional purpose that the humor serves. Humor should not be used as a substitute for traditional instruction, but it may be used to enhance and embellish the learning experience while retaining the focus of the course objective.

Don'ts: What to avoid

Humor is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place. -- Mark Twain (Classic Quotes, n.d.)

Mark Twain certainly captured the positive emotions associated with the effective use of humor in the quote above; however, the misuse of humor in the online classroom could ruin all good intentions as students may end up resenting the instructor for sarcastic comments or insensitive cultural remarks. Subjects that should be avoided as a source of humor and legal issues such as the fair use exception to copyright law and potential liability from libel will be examined in the paragraphs below.

Defining "off-limits"

What subjects should instructors avoid making fun of? Humor in the online classroom should avoid negative cultural references and avoid offending students as much as possible. Also, jokes that are location-specific should be avoided. For example, students in coastal areas may not understand high altitude jokes about an instructor's life in Colorado.

As online classes often include several generations of students including baby boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y, instructors should keep humor related to current events or well-known examples from history and avoid references to sitcoms from 1960 that few students will understand.
Other areas that this author recommends as off-limits include jokes regarding students, the university, and the administration. Instructors should eliminate sarcasm from their postings—unless the joke is directed at themselves (Krovitz, 2007).

Instructors should keep in mind that an administrative official may be observing their courses at any time. With this in mind, comments degrading one's own profession should be avoided as an outside observer may be sensitive to that. In New York, two elderly citizens were fined with disorderly conduct for telling lawyer jokes while standing outside a courthouse. Some people in line found the jokes funny, but others (a lawyer) complained (Associated Press, 2005). This author posits a "dean" test. How would the dean or department chair react if a student takes offense at a joke and copies the material to send to the dean?

Finally, instructors should beware of becoming the class clown and forgetting to augment course content with substantive material (Krovitz, 2007). This author posits that instructors invoke a one fourth rule: up to one fourth of the material can be humorous; the other three fourths need to be non-humorous.

Legal issues

Beyond subjects that are "off-limits", many online instructors often have questions about potential copyright and libel liabilities. This author would like to address these but notes that this information is for educational purposes only and not intended as legal advice. Table 2 provides some guidance and resources on topics:

Table 2. Legal Issues and Resources

Potential Issues	Related Concepts	Resources to query
Copyright infringement liability when using humorous resources, cartoons, etc.	Fair Use Improper use of copyrighted material can result in copyright infringement liability. Some copyrighted material may be used for educational purposes; however, if there are questions about the use of copyrighted material, it would be advisable to seek legal counsel before using questionable material.	http://centerforsocialmedia.org/medialiteracy (Code of Best Practices for Fair Use in Media Literacy Education, 2009) See code at this link as a potential source http://Mediaeducationlab.com (Center for Social Media, 2009)
Instructor plagiarism	Always indicate source when quoting a joke from the	One university's guide as an example: (Use your own institution's policy as well.)

	Internet Best practice: Use APA or MLA to document sources.	http://www.una.edu/library/help/plagiarism-students.html
Defamation in the form of libel or slander Defamation is defined as a false communication that causes injury to a person's reputation by either disgracing him or diminishing the respect in which he is held.	Libel is the written (printed word) or broadcast (TV, radio, internet) form of the tort of defamation. Liability for libel arises when the false communication is communicated to a person other than the individual being defamed, i.e., the communication is published.	Review writings on libel and slander from popular cases in the *New York Times* http://topics.nytximes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/l/libel_and_slander/index.html Take away point: Avoid making fun of others as you could be sued personally.
Offensive subjects	Avoid jokes about race, color, gender, national origin, age, religion, or bodily functions.	This book approaches courses with sensitive topics and how to mediate these well. Williams, J. (1994). *Classroom in Conflict: Teaching Controversial Subjects in a Diverse Society*. SUNY Series, The Philosophy of Education. State University of New York Press. Albany, NY
Invasion of privacy: tort liability for the generation of unreasonable publicity that that places another in a false light in the public eye	Caveat: Attempts at humor can go awry; what an online instructor views as humorous may be publicly humiliating or embarrassing to the "butt of the joke."	See discussion by Bechard (2009): http://law.suite101.com/article.cfm/invasion_of_privacy_torts As with all of the torts discussed in this section, it is better for the online instructor to use good judgment before printing something online that cannot be undone.
Invasion of privacy: tort liability for unreasonable public disclosure of private	An online instructor using private information to make a humorous point may be viewed as invading the privacy of an individual thus resulting	See discussion by Bechard (2009) : http://law.suite101.com/article.cfm/invasion_of_privacy_torts

facts	in liability.	

Jokes in writing cannot be revoked easily so stay away from religion, politics, and anything that would offend (Krovitz, 2007). As noted it should be emphasized to avoid jokes about race, color, gender, national origin, age, religion, or bodily functions (including sexual innuendo).

In summary, inappropriate jokes or statements posted online can be easily printed or copied and sent to the administration, so knowing which subjects should be avoided can help an instructor avoid a potential pitfall. Again, this section is for educational purposes only and should not in any way be construed as legal advice.

Conclusion

Humor is also a way of saying something serious. -- T.S. Eliot (Moncur, n.d.b)

As T.S. Eliot noted, humor can convey serious truths to provoke critical thinking. College instructors can capitalize on this by remembering there are benefits to using humor but be sure to pose questions to you as an instructor about sensitivity, diversity, and readiness. As well assure there is relevance and furthers learning objectives. Remember the tips provided for considering sharing humor online and that many of these can also be used in the traditional classroom. It's important that prudence is used-- inappropriate jokes you post online can be easily printed or copied and sent to the administration. As a caveat to these numerous advantages to augmenting course content with humor, instructors must also avoid certain subjects, learn how to use the fair use exception to copyright law to their advantage, and avoid potential libel liability to protect themselves and to ensure that students focus on course content. With proper precautions, instructors can avoid potential pitfalls while enhancing the student learning process with humor and fostering critical thinking.

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