



Observations on Humor in the University

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There is a certain mirth in the University, a gladness of heart which on occasion produces laughter (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1987). No doubt we are engaged in a serious business. "Life is real, Life is earnest," says Longfellow, and education is leading our students along the path to what they will become (Cook, 1958). There is a lot at stake. Yet learning and teaching offer a continuous menu of opportunities to observe and practice humor. Who could not be moved at the following answer to a question on a biology test:

"Question: Explain the concept of homeostasis."

"Answer: It is when you stay at home all day and don't go out" (Benson, 2011).

This strikes us as funny. At first we are indignant that the student is so far out in the weeds, after all the teacher has done. Or maybe we shift to a feeling of sympathy for

the work which must lie ahead for both the student and teacher, and the hope of future growth. It may also spawn a feeling of superiority because we would never write such an answer, and who would?

It has been my great privilege for the past twenty years to have had the opportunity to observe the use of humor in many settings at the University. This article is aimed at providing a summary of what I have learned through my experience regarding the use and misuse of humor. What I have learned leads me to certain opinions, but all are presented with a gentle mirth which says, in spite of the seriousness of our work, there is a surety that in the end all will be well with those who labor at this special place.

There is a certain type of humor which arises spontaneously. The good natured teasing before class between teacher and students serves to make students feel secure and included. But the use of humor can be used in a calculated way as a tool along with other teaching techniques. It can actually be planned and still be quite effective. Here are three areas where humor can be used as an advantage in teaching and administering:

Building Relationships

The presidential speech writer turned pundit, Peggy Noonan, says that using "humor is gracious and shows respect. It shows the audience you think enough of them to want to entertain them" (Noonan, n.d.). Much has been said about avoiding the temptation to make our classes mere entertainment, and yet there can be little doubt that a spoon full of humor can make the learning medicine go down. When used appropriately, humor sends the assuring message that "we are all in this together, that being in this class won't hurt."

Relieving Stress

Sir Thomas More used humor throughout his life as a lawyer, administrator, and scholar to relieve the stress of some very important activities. Even as he climbed the rickety steps to the executioner's platform, he quipped to a person who took his arm to steady him: "When I come down again let me shift for myself as well as I can." (Ackroyd, 1998). An example from our own history happened on the day of the transition announcement in the Hart building. After the broadcast announcement from



Salt Lake, then President Bednar, rose to speak to those gathered who were, to say the least, suffering from various stages of shock. He said, “Who would have thunk it?” While his statement could not and did not resolve all the anxiety, it set the stage for his message that there would be more answers forthcoming and that we would work things out.

Increasing Engagement

In the years teaching prior to my move to the Kimball Building, I used exercises out of Roger von Oech’s book, *A Whack on the Side of the Head* (Oech, 1983), to encourage students to think broadly about solutions to business problems. One story had to do with villagers faced with the problem of apparently dead citizens who were in fact only mostly dead (attribution to Miracle Max in the *Princess Bride*) as a result of a plague. One group came forward with the idea to place some food in each coffin and a breathing tube running to the surface so that if a fellow citizen came to, he could survive until he could be dug up. Another group’s solution was more direct. They proposed placing a wooden stake in the lid of each coffin directly over the heart of the apparently deceased villager so that when the lid was shut

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there would be no question whether the person was dead or alive. Which solution was “better?” While the second solution may have been graphic, the light-hearted exercises caught the interest of students, and I found that their connection to the more serious content of the class increased.

In a recent book, *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*, authors Peter McGraw and Joel Warner (Warner, 2014), tour all over the world testing their theory that things are funny when they are a “benign violation” of our norms. We see things as funny which are “wrong, unsettling or threatening,” but the situations must also seem “okay, acceptable, or safe.” It is true that finding things humorous is subjective and

it is almost impossible to say or do things that everyone in a class or group find funny, but I offer the following observations about what has worked or not worked for me. Some of you may remember the very experiences and may not have considered them so mirthful.

What Sometimes Works

Being clever can be an important member of the humor family. At the first general faculty meeting held after I joined the academics team in 2002, I used a Cervantes quote, “The proof of the pudding is in the tasting,” to talk about the importance of quality in our developing four-year programs. I had a basket of pudding cups we used as examples. Chocolate, vanilla, butterscotch—even the swirly kind had some contrived implications, and I enjoyed eating from the basket for a long time. (Note: You might recall that I had a pudding-deprived childhood.) We served pudding as part of the refreshments that day and later as a reminder of the message. Almost twelve years later, I have colleagues who bring up the pudding.

Humor can also be useful in tests. On business law tests I have gotten a lot of mileage out of the case of the man who was crushed to death by a shrink-to-fit Levi jacket when caught in a sudden rainstorm. Using odd situations and names sends the message to the student, “Relax, you know the principles, have some fun applying them to answer this question.” Years later when I run into former students, now well established in their careers, they will often refer to various questions and the people involved. A very few of them even remember the principles taught by the questions.

A way to build relationships with students is humor connected to our culture. At BYU-Idaho we have a fertile field for quips about home teachers, green jello, and the treatment of pre-missionaries. The cultures of the Church and the School intersect to allow us to send the message that “we’re all in this together,” or that “you are safe here, be bold, take a risk in class.”

The gulf between teachers and students can also be spanned by self-effacing remarks. I have found that jokes about my age, appearance, nearness to death, and the like all seem to get traction with students and other audiences on campus. It seems to reassure people that no matter how bad they think they have it, life is harder for me (a mild

version of Rodney Dangerfield). Self-effacement can be effective as a tool, but it should be carefully controlled (see below). There are times when it is not effective and the recipients won’t accept it.

How do you tell when what you say or do is really humorous? A recent article in the Harvard Business Review introduces the “Duchenne” test of laughter, the name of the French physician who discovered the condition. You can tell if a student’s laughter is genuine or fake by looking for crinkling around the eyes (Beard, 2014). As we all know, sometimes people laugh just to be polite, or even worse, out of sympathy.

What May not Work

As we mature as a University, I have noticed that certain attempts at humor don’t help; rather, the intended message explodes in mid-air and spirals downward. For me, dressing up in class or wandering around campus now would seem misplaced. Maybe it is I who has changed. My plastic nose and mustache disguise, earlier so often used, have been retired with other relics in the cluttered drawers of my office, and I will probably not appear as a large white rabbit again.

It used to be fun to joke with students, especially early in the class before the first round of testing, about how if they “work really hard, do everything assigned at a very high level, they’ll almost all get above a C-.” I’ve got to think of something new. Students don’t joke about grades anymore, although in the end I wonder if they should lighten up a little.

There is no question that humor can be used to demean and ridicule. A teacher can lose the confidence and trust of students almost irretrievably with some comments. Even with further assurances of humor like the retractor “just kidding,” people from Sugar City or Mud Lake can be wounded, and in some cases the wounds don’t heal.

Similarly, one must be careful about jokes or stories which might hit the nerves of other departments or majors. Recently, in speaking to the students and faculty in the Design and Construction Management Department, I told a story about two carpenters who were confused about which way nails were pointing. For non-builder audiences, the joke has always at least drawn tentative laughter, but I didn’t get much from this group. I

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wondered later if it was because they thought I was making fun of carpenters. A later joke about sharp business practices seemed to get a better response.

Since beginning to teach American Foundations, I have occasionally ventured into the world of political humor. Of course, there is a lot of very low-hanging fruit in this area. I have always appreciated the democrats as a target of jokes. My quip in faculty meeting that “the democrats in this area hold their meetings in a phone booth,” always draws a hearty response, but it finally hit me that the audiences consist mostly of republicans of one ilk or another. I have found that in this area you should spread the humor around as evenly as you can, but even then it is hard to get a libertarian to laugh. I guess they are focused on the individual choice not to be drawn into the group.

Finally, I offer a cautionary word about self-criticism. When used appropriately, it can send a very lighthearted message of inclusion and assurance to those with whom we deal. It must, however, be of a certain vein. I have found that remarks, attempted at humor, which deal with the competence of the teacher do not go over well, and should be avoided. As I mentioned in the prior section, jokes about my age or appearance, my closeness to death or the nursing home, are easy for me to make and to receive the laughter of students. I don't really believe that I will soon be gumming creamed corn, but jokes about lack of preparation, failing memory, or inability to hear or understand student responses don't seem to be positive. Students want to think their teachers are competent in both their disciplines and in the craft of teaching. In addition, even those of us who can stand some teasing take constructive pride in being the best we can and know somewhere deep inside that jokes about our teaching are insincere and false.

Conclusion

Humor can be a powerful tool in learning and teaching. It can add a richness to our content and facilitate delivery, but there are risks too. Sometimes things don't work the way we want. In those cases, which for me are numerous,

you just have to dust yourself off and try again. Even when things don't work out you can turn things around, you can learn to recover from flops in a good natured way. Because of my many failed attempts, I have learned to turn and send positive messages: “This didn't work. I'm not hurt by it. I'll try again, and will be better next time. We're in this together.” It reassures others and encourages them to do the same.

Humor is also an elixir, a potion that can overcome us. We must remember it is just a part of what we are and do and must be constantly controlled. The genie must be kept in the bottle. Otherwise we can damage credibility and thus our effectiveness. You can become known as a jokster, the clown who can always be depended on for a laugh but not much else. It has taken me a long time and much effort to learn that not every funny thing I think needs to be said.

In the movie *Little Big Man*, Chief Dan George goes to a mountaintop to die. He lies there for a while and then it begins to rain. Finally, he gives up and walks down the mountain, back to the continuation of his life. “Sometimes the magic happens, sometimes it doesn't,” he says (Jonas, 2004). Maybe that is all we can say for sure about the use of humor in our BYU-Idaho lives. We know that humor can be an effective tool and it adds a certain magic to life and learning, but it doesn't always work the way we want. Maybe that's the beauty of it. There will always be another chance to try. ❀

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