

Should Humor Be a Desired Disposition for Teacher Candidates?

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A friend of mine once asked me, “When was the last time you walked down the halls of a school and heard laughter?” That question made me think about Harry Potter. Some of you know that I am a huge Harry Potter fan. I thought about one particular book in the series by J.K. Rowling that included vivid images and descriptions of Azkaban, the prison for criminals in the magical world of Hogwarts, and the guards in the jail, the Dementors. Unfortunately, I can compare many schools whose halls I have frequented much more akin to Azkaban and its educators more like the Dementors. This is not right and does not have to be the way learning is delivered. Wherever there are children there should be laughter (Morrison, M.K. n.d.).

Before the days of Assisting Developing Evaluating Professional Teaching (ADEPT), we had an evaluation system in South Carolina called APT that stood for Assessment of Performance in Teaching. This system was contrived to say the least and the candidate was awarded or penalized for their use or absence of humor in the lesson. The theory for some time has been that humor would in fact be a positive factor and would even, if used appropriately, enable more learning to occur.

Humor is conventionally defined for the purposes of this paper as “the quality of being laughable or “a state of mind, mood, spirit” Webster’s Dictionary (2001). The dictionary further describes humor as “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating something that is comical, amusing, or absurdly incongruous.” Humor is characterized by expressions in the body and in the emotions. The definition of humor is in itself a high-inference variable. What you perceive as funny, I might take as unintentional offense and vice versa. However, here are some reasons why humor is desirable in the classroom. It:

- facilitates retention of novel information;
- increases learning speed;
- improves problem solving;
- relieves stress;
- reduces test anxiety; and
- increases perceptions of teacher credibility (Torok, et al 2004).

In addition, humor enhances the creative process and is one of the coping devices used to combat disease. A creative person enjoys the opportunity to actively generate his or her own wit (Clabby, 1979). Besides, humor improves self-esteem and enhances social interactions (Cousins, 1991). Today’s interest in humor’s effects has grown so much that the field has a name: psychoneuroimmunology, or the study of how psychological factors, the brain and the immune system work to influence health (Introduction, para 4). Good health affects students’ attention, memory and retention, and our teacher candidates’ ability to help all of their class members learn.

Humor and learning did not appear in educational literature until the late 1960's and early 70's. The airing of *Sesame Street* got the attention of educators, teachers and parents and interest in the subject sparked. Big bird, Cookie Monster, Bert and Ernie, Oscar, the Grouch, The Count and others captured the attention of a wide audience and old and young began to watch, learn and smile (Oppliger, 2003).

When sense comes to humor a metamorphism occurs that reflects our entire belief system. Our individual sense of humor is inseparable from our whole being. It is inextricably linked with our emotional selves. According to M.K. Morrison, the experience of an optimistic energy force has been defined as "humergy" ("You can't be serious!").

While humor has many desirable traits, in order to set the most appropriate tone, it may take some time and a lot of practice. It also involves choosing the proper type of humor. One needs to be aware that some people are not comfortable with humor. It is certainly a disposition that we have not readily taught our pre-service teacher candidates how to integrate into their teaching.

There are three types of humor to consider as a possible teaching tool:

1. Incongruity;
2. Superiority; and
3. Relief.

Incongruity theory suggests that people laugh at what surprises or is unexpected (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Incongruity often means a joke is inserted, but the joke initiator must be careful to prepare his or her audience for the punch line. There is always the probability that the joke may fail. Candidates also seem to have little tolerance for professors who use jokes for jokes sake. The gender of the professor also matters as research results give higher scores to male professors over female (Karle-Weiss, 1990).

Superiority humor involves the status of group members. It is this type of humor that is created from a desire to feel superior over others or to control others. High status group members joke more than low status ones.

Relief humor is based on the idea that tension and stress are released when this type of humor is used. Self-disparaging humor especially when used by the leader of a group can act as a tension reliever (Morreall, 1991). Self-disparaging humor is certainly the safest type for teacher candidates to use as the target for the laughter is the candidate and never his or her students.

Fitzsimmons (2003) was delighted to find an exceptional supervising teacher who had the respect of his students and was seen by all of his peers as an exceptional manager and teacher. Since classroom management skills are always a problem for beginning teachers, Fitzsimmons and colleagues determined to learn the secret of this outstanding educator, Mr. Terry. What was discovered was not some magic management style, but an incredible use of words/language. Terry used continual humor as play, and interaction with his students that involved jokes, sarcasm and cutting humor. When interviewed, Terry confessed that from the beginning of his teaching career he had asked himself, "What is working for me at school?" "How can I improve my practice?" For Terry

humor was the vehicle he used to conduct challenging conversations with his students. He found that he could draw individuals out and gather groups together into highly personal relationships with himself and with each other.

Student teachers were asked to critique Mr. Terry's classroom manner. What they discovered was that there was a different power structure in his room and also a very different set of norms as well as different relationships. Congruency was a huge factor in Mr. Terry's room. As he pointed out, "Kids are the best judges of everything that happens in the classroom. You have to be real and everything you do has to be real. You have a product to sell, and it's got to be real to turn the kids onto it (page 198)." This teacher is also extremely spontaneous so the students never know what he will do next. A culture of respect is channeled through the use of humor and an atmosphere of caring causes the class to open up and learn. Terry consistently invites the child to be a part of the collective whole.

Along with the appropriate use of humor another factor that is closely related involves teacher "immediacy." Immediacy in relation to humor has been studied by researchers and their results give specific suggestions for the beginning teacher. For example, it is recommended that candidates:

- consciously attempt to be vocally expressive,
- smile,
- have a relaxed body position,
- gesture,
- move about the classroom (Manage By Walking Around - MBWA),
- maintain eye contact,
- use humor/praise,
- indicate a willingness to engage in conversations outside of the classroom,
- use personal examples or talk about experiences outside of class,
- encourage students to talk and ask for feedback.

These immediacy behaviors are significantly associated with student learning outcomes (Gorham & Christophel, 1990).

Laughter and humor are like an invitation, and the goal is clear, to bridge the social distance. Humor between educators and students can produce a shared understanding and a common psychological bond. Humor reduces conflict and enhances human relations. Humor has a positive impact on group cohesion. Humor has these additional functions:

- reducing tension,
- relieving embarrassment,
- facilitating self-disclosure,
- saving face,
- disarming potentially aggressive "others,"
- entertaining, and
- alleviating boredom.

Individuals who use humor are seen as likeable, attractive and more likely to behave in prosocial ways. People enjoy being around those who like to laugh. A humor enriched lesson has even been shown to increase attendance in class (Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Romer, 1993; White, 1992).

From observational and experimental evidence (Gorham & Christophel, 1990) humor

- facilitates teacher/student rapport,
- enhances perceptions of competence, delivery, and appeal
- perceived intelligence,
- friendliness and character.

By the mid 80's over 50 papers had been published expounding on the value of humor and language acquisition. However, the results of humor and information acquisition get mixed results. It is important that we do not totally embrace this disposition without understanding the negative and risky elements of its use. For example, a teacher who uses humor in order to build a strong rapport with his or her students risks losing face and becoming perceived as a jokester. Too much humor or self-disclosure is not appropriate and moderate amounts are usually more preferred. Researchers who have done extensive reviews of the literature state that the use of humor and the amount of learning that occurs is not conclusive. If the humor that is used is not judged by the students to be open, honest, and spontaneous the teacher may be perceived as hostile and may create suspicion among the learners.

The use of unrelated humor can have a debilitating effect on the perception of the teachers' intelligence. The creation of a playful frame of mind could interfere with learning new information because it could block any rehearsal effort making the rehearsal seem like work and therefore undesirable. Another caveat when using humor is that it is highly personal, subjective and contextual, therefore making student reaction hard to predict.

In this age of accountability there is a belief that fun is a waste of time and time is a precious commodity. In any school there is at least one 'humordoomer' who thinks that fun and work do not mix (Morrison, n.d.). The best things that are good for students are sometimes the very ones that will get the teacher, especially the beginning teacher, in trouble. How sad, as the integration of fun and humor benefits teaching. In addition, there are incredibly funny individuals leading the class in many education settings.

If you have any doubt about the effectiveness of humor, just think about what you watch on Super Bowl Sunday. Is it the game or the fantastically funny commercials? In less than two minutes most of us give our attention to a product or jingle that causes the product to stay in our long term memory until collectively we, the public, have spent billions of dollars. Economically, humor is worth it!

For many, humor cannot be present without a high level of trust. Actually fun is an indicator of trust. Think about the people you tease and joke with. They are your friends. If you are wondering if humor is a part of your culture, listen for where there is laughter.

The conclusion from the pro-humorists as well as the humordoomer researchers is that teaching with humor is more successful and more enjoyable as long as the humor is somewhat related to the educational material and is not perceived as offensive to the students. “Successful use of humor depends on employing the proper type of humor, under the proper conditions, at the proper time, and with properly motivated and receptive students” (Oppliger, 2003, p. 269).

A research study by Fitzsimmons and McKenzie in 2003 revealed a great deal of understanding from their college students regarding the use of humor as a classroom strategy. Candidates completed a short survey using a Likert scale of 1 – Strongly Agree to 5 Strongly Disagree. Both sets of candidates surveyed gave positive accolades to the use of humor for the following reasons. It:

- promoted a positive classroom environment;
- increased learning;
- was a tool for engagement; and
- promoted enjoyable learning.

The same survey was distributed to students at the University of South Carolina Upstate. Twenty-two out of thirty-five students from an introductory course responded to the survey and nine out of twelve students enrolled as non-degree seeking students responded to the survey. The non-degree students currently are employed as teaching assistants. The results revealed the following:

- The non-degree respondents viewed the use of humor more positively than the undergraduates.
- Both cohorts agreed that merely the use of humor is not a measure of being a caring teacher.
- The undergraduate cohort did not feel that humor assisted with the development of interpersonal relationships.

Teaching assistants commented:

“I view teachers/professors who display their sense of humor in class as more caring and approachable.”

“I think (humor) makes the teacher more ‘human.’”

“The teacher who uses humor is one who understands life and appreciates living. They show that they can make it through the day regardless of the hardship.”

Undergraduate candidates remarked:

“It really depends on what type of humor and how much humor the teacher uses.”

“Humor can be a great asset as long as it is not at the expense of another.”

“When a teacher uses humor it makes me think that they really enjoy what they are doing.”

“Humor makes me think the teacher is more on my level and cares more about me.”

The questions still remain regarding how and where candidates should learn to use humor and how to use it effectively. First of all, it is important that candidates not take themselves too seriously. While teaching is a serious business, living does not have to be. Candidates, when they begin their field experiences should be encouraged to look for the humor that exists within the school room and the school building. If teachers and administrators are using humor, this should be apparent to the candidate. The candidate should be encouraged to make a note of this attribute and share what the outcome of this trait was for this particular school.

Listening to the language of the school culture is another assignment for the candidate to explore. For example, are there certain words that cause smiles to blossom? This is a perfect opportunity for the candidate to ask, “Why is this funny?” “Why is everyone laughing?” Lively discussions could then determine if humor was a positive aspect to their visit and why.

Some candidates need to develop their humor quotient. Everyone will not agree that humor can add anything to the education of the young. However, the teacher candidates should advise their field supervisors that they are studying humor and its effects on learning. Candidates should freely share with their field supervisors that humor can be used as a motivational tool when used appropriately. Thus, they can become a vital link to using humor effectively and be a bridge for its further study via action research.

Topics to consider for further research include:

- Does humor increase grades?
- How many times do teacher candidates laugh per day?
- What are candidates finding funny?
- Does laughter correlate to grades?
- Can humor increase creativity?
- Why are male teachers more humorous than female?
- Can humor be used when teaching via distance education?

In conclusion by employing humor we can play, explore and come to better understand ourselves and the world we live in (Ferber, 2006). Laughter is free and has no known negative side effects. Even though this is a complex subject, we should pursue more research in this area.

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