



## Center for Teaching and Learning Newsletter

January 2018

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### Message from the Director



Take my instructor—please! Learning can be fun and using humor in the classroom can facilitate that. As is true of any pedagogical approach, however, the value depends on how it is done. There are several pitfalls that faculty members should be careful to avoid. The first mistake is when instructors try to be funny by making political jokes that exhibit an obvious bias or that are simply irrelevant to the subject matter of the class. The second hazard involves making comments intended to be amusing, but are sexist. In these two cases, the effect will be to turn off some or all students and undermine the credibility of the instructor and possibly create a hostile environment for open inquiry. Instructors are also prone to follow the classic Toastmaster’s advice of always starting with a joke, but these can be forced, inappropriate, and often not even funny. Have you heard the one about the instructor who ....?

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### Upcoming Events

- 1/25 Graduate Teaching Assistant workshop on *Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy*
- 2/1-2 4th Annual *Excellence in Teaching* Lecture and Workshop with Dr. Jay R. Howard, sociologist and Dean of Liberal Arts at Butler University, author of *“Discussion in the college classroom: Getting your students engaged and participating in person and online.”*
- 2/6 Workshop on *Creating a Diverse and Inclusive Learning Environment*, presented by the Office of Diversity and Community Engagement
- 2/7 Workshop on *Tools for Reflection on Teaching and Assessment*, with Dr. Gloria Shenoy
- 2/15 Workshop on *Interpreting Student Evaluations of Teaching*, with Dr. Paul Diehl

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### Teaching Tip

Using humor as a tool for teaching does not require you to be something you’re not. For some instructors, humor is a natural component of their self-presentation and they find it easy to use it to build rapport with students and to connect humorous observations to course material. But even if “being funny” does not come easily to you, you can include humorous elements in your teaching in a way that does not seem forced, stilted, or unnatural. Instead of a high-risk approach, such as telling a joke that might bomb or is offensive, you can use other humor in a variety of ways. Consider adding humorous and relevant quotations or cartoon images to your syllabus or lecture slides. For example, you might be able to make a useful point with your students by using the Doonesbury “Teaching is Dead” strip, <http://doonesbury.washingtonpost.com/strip/archive/1985/01/27>, or start a discussion of

research methods, <https://xkcd.com/242/>, or address procrastination with a Calvin & Hobbes comic or a quotation, <http://quoteswelfareby.blogspot.com/2009/11/procrastination-is-thief-of-time.html>.

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### Research into Practice

Can injecting humor into your teaching help your students learn more effectively? Research suggests the answer is yes, provided that the humorous examples you use are relevant to the content being learned. In a study of 165 undergraduates in an online psychology course, students were more likely to answer recognition test items correctly when the material had been presented with a humorous related video rather than a serious or unrelated one. Humor alone does not correspond to improved learning.

Instructional Humor Processing Theory explains that amusement motivates attention, takes over working memory, and promotes memory consolidation. This is probably not very surprising to most instructors. Another aspect that adds an interesting dimension to this connection, however, is that for something to be funny, we need to engage in some amount of mental effort to identify how and why it is funny. There has to be some incongruity, juxtaposition of ideas, or violation of expectations, so engaging in the deeper levels of cognitive processing to appreciate the humor—to get the joke—may explain another aspect of why humor promotes learning.

For more on this topic, see:

Suzuki, H., & Heath, L. (2014). Impacts of humor and relevance on the remembering of lecture details. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 27(1), 87-101.

Cavanagh, S. R. (2016). *The spark of learning: Energizing the college classroom with the science of emotion* (pp. 74-82). Morgantown: West Virginia University Press.

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### What the Students Say

Students like it when faculty members exhibit humor in the classroom. Faculty members appear more approachable when faculty members show their more human side, especially if the humor is self-deprecating. Student motivation can also be enhanced from humor if they take a personal liking because of it and humor makes them look forward to coming to class. Most significantly, humor can enhance learning if something funny in class encourages them to remember a key concept or be able to understand that concept or application because of the funny way it was explained. Students don't want their instructors to be stand-up comedians nor do they expect humor to be a dominant feature of instruction. In those instances, the pedagogical value of humor is lost and even becomes detrimental.

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