



Humour and the Quirky Nature of Online Teaching

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Abstract

Humour is a matter of perception. Like beauty it is in the eye of the beholder – its very nature is unique to the conveyor and receiver. While one person can be highly amused by a trigger for humour another sitting beside may completely miss its meaning or interpretation. Humour is also highly contextual, cultural and often mysterious in its effect on people.

Using humour as a teaching tool in both traditional classrooms and in an online teaching environment is fraught with complexity, subtleties, dangers and delights but applied correctly can also add to student's participation and learning.

As teachers we tread a fine line. The classroom is not generally perceived as a place for jokes and humour, teachers do not have a licence to generate humour and cause amusement.

However we do know and have for many years, the value humour has to teaching. Even in prehistoric times before the internet its importance had been recognised as a way of improving student learning, participation and enjoyment of the subject they are aspiring to learn. It is important to examine these aspects of teaching prior to online learning to clearly understand just how relevant and critical it is to our learning and knowledge acquisition.

Online teaching is a relatively recent phenomena and presents teachers with new and challenging issues in their teaching practice. This presentation explores the many quirks and quandaries of using humour in such an environment and draws on what is already known about the value of humour in classroom teaching and examines this uneasy transfer to online teaching.

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Humour, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary is a *quality of action, speech etc, which causes amusement: facetiousness, comicality; (more fully sense of humour) the faculty of perceiving and enjoying what is ludicrous or amusing: a sense of ludicrous or amusing.*[1] It is perhaps one of the most delicate of all human emotions resulting in laughter, joy or indeed the reverse; of anger, hostility and misinterpretation of what has been said or done by another person. One person's joke can be another's antithesis: it can be seen as funny, witty and amusing or alternatively, racist, sexist and hurtful to another individual. There is a licence for humour given out by the community to those who wish to use it. Comedians, jesters, sitcoms are allowed to make fun, to entertain and challenge us through their actions. Some are given a special licence to poke fun: Steady Eddie has permission to make jokes about people with disabilities, 'wog' jokes by Greek or Italian comedians and gay humour by the gay and lesbian community.

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Ron Deiter, Professor of Economics at Iowa State University argued that;

The one main reason for using humour in the classroom is to improve student learning.

The creative development and expression of humour in the classroom deals with 'how' to



teach, not 'what' to teach. The use of humour should be a teaching tool that, if effective, will increase the amount of 'what' is taught that is actually learned by students. [2]

He goes on to show the positive effects of humour, presenting several factors which add to the value of humour in the classroom including breaking down barriers between student and teacher, assisting students to retain information, making classes enjoyable and generates a far less stressful environment. Also it is simply much more fun and enjoyable for teachers.

Face-to-face teaching lends itself to the inclusion of humour. It is a dynamic, active, organic and challenging environment. A good session will encompass humour like an electrical storm, flashing and firing in all directions. A word, a look, an action between student and teacher is exciting, rewarding and an adrenaline hit for the teacher. As author Gail Godwin says; 'good teaching is one-fourth preparation and three-fourths theatre.' [3]

It is of course alive, immediate and often unpredictable. A good teacher can instantly gage the mood, their student's response to their actions and adjust accordingly. Class dynamics are unique, the same expression or idiosyncratic comment can explode into laughter with one group and flop in another. Mistakes or misinterpretation can be addressed and dealt with on the spot.

Of the personal dimensions of teaching, humour is the most human of them all. Teachers who value humour, who not only tolerate laughter and fun in their classrooms, but even invite them in and encourage them to stay, are perceived by students as being more interesting and relevant than those who appear grim and humourless [4].

Not so with online teaching. This environment, by its very nature, is constrained: it is a harsh, uncompromising and almost clinical teaching culture. It is technology driven, highly structured and often less than friendly for both students and staff.

However it is also remarkable in its fruition. It has opened the world of learning up to so many students who otherwise would have little or no access to learning. But in historical terms it is still in its infancy and in many ways we are still at the bumbling stage of our understanding and management of the processes involved.

Incorporation of humour is one way we can alleviate some of the perceived sterility of the online teaching environment. We also know it works and helps students to feel more relaxed, comfortable and to enjoy their learning. It does not necessarily make them learn more but a happy student is more likely to be receptive to engagement and knowledge acquisition.

This was shown clearly in a study by Anderson (2011) in which two online groups were tested using humour in their course, one active, the other control. [5]

Their results were clear, 'student evaluations from the second group showed that humour positively enhanced the online learning environment... Conclusions are drawn that humour incorporated in online courses helps motivate students to participate more in discussion and contributes to a positive learning environment.'

Of course humour has a purpose. We are not there to entertain but to teach so everything we do must in the end work toward our goal of enticing students into learning and understanding. Shatz and LoSchiavo (2006) extrapolate on this 'When deciding which material to use for the online course, we strongly encourage instructors to consider ... First, does the humour promote an educational objective? Second, will the students understand and appreciate the humour? Third, is the target of the humour appropriate for the course?' [6]

This is critical to the process. Why and how should a teacher include some sense of humour into their teaching? It is a delicate, sensitive and challenging methodology and fraught with serious dangers through misinterpretation, lack of body language and the inability to immediately correct any misunderstandings.

David James (2004) explores this when he states;

The danger, of course, for both faculty and students, is misinterpretation. Many studies have shown that students in an online course tend to interpret instructors as being serious in all posted comments, often more so than the instructor intended. While students may not interpret one another with such severity, there are still problems of misinterpretation and offense being silently endured by others. [7]

It also takes some skill and understanding and it may well be prudent to exercise some degree of caution when introducing humour into the online teaching environment, especially for those just beginning to teach online. I have taught for many years both in class and online and it is only recently



that I have taken some tentative steps in experimenting with the use of humour in my teaching with Open Universities Australia. The results have been encouraging. As one student commented; 'This is the first unit I have studied that needed a 'LOL' button)'

In this article I have highlighted the importance of humour as an effective tool in teaching practice with specific reference to some of the issues and challenges faced by online tutors in their endeavours to integrate its use into their teaching practice. It is a valuable, unique feature in a teacher's palette of tricks and skills they can tap into as a way of engaging and communicating with students as an integral part of their learning experiences. A sentiment shared so well by actress and comedian Lily Tomlin (2003) when she said, 'I like a teacher who gives you something to take home to think about besides homework.' [9].

References

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