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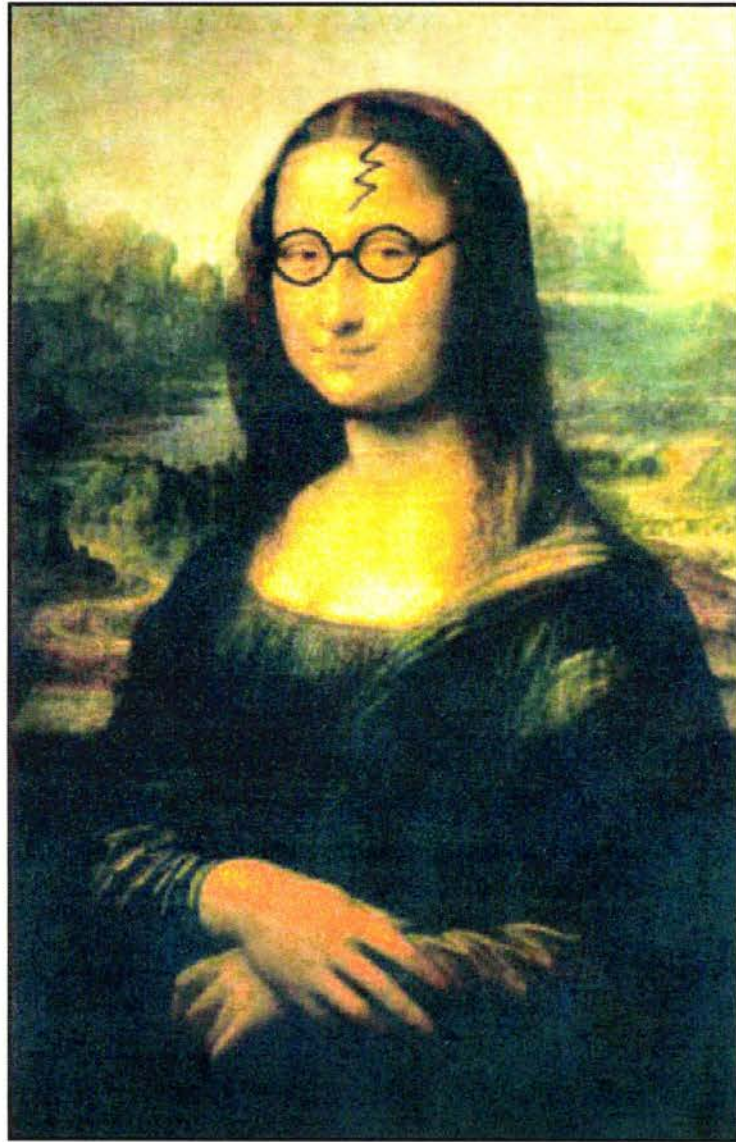
**THE SENSE IN HUMOUR:
A Personal Exploration of Humour
in the Teaching of Adults.
Some Questions and Tentative
Answers.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of
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Abstract

This thesis is a personal exploration of the potential applications of humour in the teaching of adults. I have provided some questions and tentative answers about the use of humour in the facilitation of adult learning. Having recognised the value of humour in my own teaching practice, I have examined the ways in which humour, when applied appropriately, can promote creative thinking by enhancing the processes of knowing, perceiving and discovering.

Adult learning has been said to be a means of gaining knowledge and skills, a way to satisfy learner needs and a process of critical self-reflection that may lead to transformation. Adult education can involve challenging periods of transformation and students may require assistance to overcome inhibitions, behaviours and beliefs about themselves their culture and learning. In this thesis I have sought to explore how humour, manifesting itself in verbal, written and visual formats, may be a valuable pedagogical tool to address such issues.

One of the purposes of this thesis is to contribute to knowledge in teaching practice by demonstrating that the systematic and informed introduction of humour into individual teaching strategies may provide a more people-centred climate which addresses individual and group learning needs from the perspective of teacher and student.

Introduction

“The man of greatest humour is he who has the most curious, observant and reflecting mind, who has a mind richly stored with experiences, whose mind is capable of ... alertness of movement, springing from point to point.” (Menon, 1931).

This thesis is a personal exploration of the potential applications of humour in the teaching of adults. The central question, which I will address, is what role does humour play in the facilitation of learning in adult education? Having recognised the value of using humour within my own teaching practice, I was curious as to whether it might have an important role to play in methodological approaches to adult education. In particular I was interested in how humour might contribute to the effectiveness of delivery of programmes of study within my field of practice, visual communications. In order to address the central question I have reviewed relevant literature relating to both humour and education and considered theories and research findings in both areas. In exploring the importance of humour in adult education I have focused on four specific questions: what defines humour, is humour useful when learning, how does humour help develop visual literacy and how does culture impact on humour in the classroom?

I have been involved personally in the education of adults as a teacher in the fields of art and visual communications for the last seventeen years in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Within my practice I have observed a prolific utilisation of humour, not only in my own teaching style but also in the style of many of my colleagues. Whilst undertaking a previous research project for this degree (Watt, 2004), I asked colleagues

about their awareness of their use of humour and its effects on the social and learning dynamics within their classrooms. Very few had given it any conscious thought and fewer still had deliberately written it into their lesson planning; yet the majority agreed that humour had, to varying degrees, played a role in their teaching. This assessment led to the conclusion that there were important questions to be addressed and that awareness needed to be raised concerning the important roles humour may play in teaching and learning. I have always been aware of the generally positive response that my use of humour has had on my own students. I have discovered, through my own experiences and from research undertaken for this work, that a modicum of humour in teaching can have benefits as to how students absorb, retain, process and apply information. I also believe that the use of humour can assist in refreshing and reframing how, what and why I teach, not least for the contribution of humour in making teaching a fun and rewarding experience.

For many people humour is narrowly defined as being synonymous with laughter. However, as this work will uncover, it may also facilitate a unique expression of discovery, knowledge and understanding. Humour can include playing with knowledge, meaning or beliefs. It's experience can be a process that can promote creativity and intellectual freedom, a constant challenge that has the capacity to enhance the life of the imagination. This enquiry will ask how humour plays an important part in how we communicate with one another, in general, as a species and more specifically its effects and influences within the field of adult education. It will also ask how it can assist in the provision of mechanisms with which to cope with the variety of emotional, cognitive and cultural dilemmas with which adult life confronts us. These problems often manifest themselves in our schools and colleges and I will examine

the role that humour can play in providing teachers and their students with a means of dealing with such dilemmas.

Educators should be aware of conveying values and attitudes that may have an enduring influence on the learner. The findings of this study may be of particular importance in that they may assist in enlightening educators to become more aware of the diverse nature of humour, including its darker side. As well as the potential benefits of humour usage this work will illustrate how an ill-considered use of humour by an educator can result in a student taking offence, adversely affecting the student-teacher relationship, thus inhibiting the learning process.

In this thesis I will attempt to explain how the use of humour in teaching practice has the potential to put students through the same mental gymnastics as the philosopher, in that it helps foster imagination and mental flexibility, encouraging students to approach problems from a fresh perspective. Good humour, like good philosophy, may have the ability to be conceptually liberating; therefore I will ask how this could have benefits in the promotion of creative thinking, particularly for my own area of teaching specialisation which is visual communication and for adult education as a whole.

“Good humour” in the context of this thesis I will define as being well executed in terms of the users knowledge of specific types of humour: humour that is inoffensive and can be widely responded to, appealing to the current interests and beliefs of the addressees. Subtle, intelligent humour that makes students think may in turn help facilitate the development and use of their problem-solving skills. Humour which requires reasoning on the part of the humourist can promote insight or

emotional release, helping to reveal a truth or criticism which may, otherwise be difficult to reveal. Humour may have the ability to assist students find meaningful connections between two events that were thought to be entirely incongruous.

I will examine the consequences of the use of humour within the teaching profession and highlight the benefits and pitfalls for our pedagogies. I will also explore the means by which adult educators can develop teaching strategies and systematically utilise “good” humour in their practice through a more comprehensive understanding of the key theories and definitions which underpin our notions of humour.

This thesis will explore the ways in which visual communicators have used humour to examine and criticise aspects of cultural diversity and the role that humour plays in concept generation in visual communications education. Humour plays a central role in the generation and content of much of the imagery within our visual cultures. One of the important components of my teaching is to use this evidence to provide guidance when developing a sense of cultural awareness, understanding and sensitivity during the process of production.

In Chapter 1 of the thesis I will elucidate some of the key theories that underpin notions of humour, providing the reader with a general description of some of the key theories, classifications and definitions of humour. These theoretical and philosophical frameworks will be referred to throughout this work in order to support the arguments and propositions in each chapter. Within this chapter I will also outline a brief historical contextualisation of how humour has been defined over the ages, focussing mainly on the evolution of the concept of humour in

Western thought to become what it means to us today. The relevance of humour within diverse cultural groups is acknowledged; however in-depth exploration of multiple cultural factors is outside the scope of this work.

What I discovered whilst undertaking research for this work was the multitude and diversity of theories and definitions on the subject of humour. Many theories of humour have been identified; these include general theories about humour or laughter, statements of the circumstances in which humour may occur and characterizations or descriptions. The majority of contemporary scholars agree that these can be sorted into three groups: Relief or Release Theories, Incongruity Theories and Superiority Theories. The first group considers the function of humour, explaining why we laugh and, more importantly, what survival or coping value humour has in relation to teaching. The second group considers the stimuli for humour and the third group reflects upon our responses to humour. At the end of this chapter I have briefly outlined four contemporary theories which have relevance to this work.

In Chapter 2 I will examine how humour can be utilised by teachers in the classroom and will make an initial exploration of how humour can help facilitate learning within adult education. I will examine the potential benefits and drawbacks of humour usage by teachers in their classrooms. The issues raised in this section arise from the premise that the more we know as instructors about the practicalities and the potential uses of humour, the more we can do with it. In addition, this knowledge has the potential to increase awareness of the uses and practical applications, which, in turn, may increase the capacity to assist in instructional development. I will also examine how the applications of humour by

teachers in their classrooms can lead to positive and/or negative outcomes for both teacher and student in relation to the facilitation of learning within the social dynamics of the classroom. This chapter will also examine how, by introducing a healthy sense of humour into our working lives as teachers, dealing with the stresses and strains of the job may be achieved in a more positive and relaxed spirit.

There is a large amount of theoretical postulation on the subject of humour itself but a relative dearth of actual research on humour in adult education. The evidence presented in Chapter 2 will be based upon a literature review of prominent international research on the subject of humour in teaching. This will be complemented with a comparative analysis of exploratory research undertaken by myself from recorded and written data gathered from colleagues from reflective conversations on the subject of humour usage in their classrooms. This research took place in the first year of my masterate.

In the third chapter I will ask what role humour may play in helping to alleviate the cognitive dissonance which can arise as a result of the discomforts experienced when students are confronted by new information during transformational learning experiences. This enquiry will be based upon the theoretical work on Transformative Learning by the American scholar Jack Mezirow (1991). This section will examine the potential uses of humour in adult education to encourage critical reflection of new or challenging information, which can often evoke emotional, intellectual, physical, cultural or spiritual discomfort. I will ask how humour can assist in the development of higher order thinking by helping promote critical self-reflection, helping to create a classroom atmosphere, which is more inclusive, discriminatory and integrative. In

addition, this chapter will examine how the inclusion of humour may help in the promotion of activities central to critical reflection. I will query how the instructor's use of appropriate humour can promote assumption analysis, contextual awareness and imaginative speculation. Assumption analysis refers to thinking in such a way that it challenges our beliefs, values, cultural practices and social structures helping to assess their impact on individual's daily proceedings. Contextual awareness is the realisation that our assumptions are socially and personally created in a historical and cultural context. Imaginative speculation indicates the ability to imagine alternative ways of thinking in order to challenge our ways of knowing and acting.

In Chapter 4 I will ask why and how humour contributes to teaching concept generation in visual communications classrooms. I will explore how students approach a set of visual problems in order to successfully communicate an idea visually through an understanding and use of metaphor, pun, allegory and analogy. This section will draw parallels between the thought processes which occur in the production of visual imagery, particularly when applying the principles of metaphor, and the cognitive processes involved in humour insights, particularly how human beings process incongruity resolution in verbal humour.

In this chapter I examine ways in which humour contributes to the development of creative thinking. These propositions will be based upon the theories of Lateral Thinking and Bisociative Thinking, both of which share a similar belief which states that the creative activities involved in artistic originality, scientific discovery and comic inspiration share a fundamental pattern. This section aims to illustrate how teachers of visual communications can help promote new ideas or insights in their

students by understanding how human beings cognitively process humour, providing deeper understanding of how the brain works as a thinking tool. It will be supplemented with an historical and contemporary contextualisation of the use by visual artists and designers of humour in their work..

In the final chapter I will ask what role humour has to play in our increasingly multicultural classrooms and examine the role humour may have in the creation of a more egalitarian teaching environment from an anthropological perspective. This chapter will ask how aware and sensitive we are as teachers to the impact humour can have in a culturally diverse classroom. This will be examined from the perspective of humour being a universal human emotion, something that we all share and have in common as a species but which reflects diversity of experience. I will ask how humour can assist teachers and students to consider and reappraise the multitude of cultural issues, which can arise in their classroom and in societies as a whole. I will enquire as to how humour can help broaden and develop socio-cultural tolerance and understanding across a wide range of issues including gender, age, politics, spirituality/religion and ethnicity. This will be balanced by examining how the flip-side of humour can encourage and perpetuate many myths, stereotypes and prejudices within these cultural frameworks which can often belittle or discriminate against groups of people with diverse cultural beliefs.

The objective of this thesis is to argue how the use of appropriate humour may help provide adult educators with a means of understanding learners attitudes, past experiences, habits, opinions and cultures and encourage learner involvement. Since undertaking my master's degree I have

become aware of the relative lack of in-depth research into the uses of humour in adult education when compared to other sectors in our societies. Countless high-level businesses are hiring humour specialists to help develop creative thinking, mental flexibility and the ability to cope with change (Morreall, 2004). Considerable research has been undertaken examining the role of humour in making our lives less stressful; for example, humour has been included in the development of strategies to help ease anxiety in health care settings (Cornett, 1986). By providing educators with a deeper understanding of the nature and functions of humour this thesis aims to contribute to the development of adult educational teaching practice by contributing to and enhancing the current body of humour research.