The Attitudes of University Faculty toward Humor as a Pedagogical Tool: Can We Take a Joke?

John Huss and Shannon Eastep
Northern Kentucky University

Faculty members in a College of Education responded to a mixed methods questionnaire regarding their attitudes toward the use of humor as a pedagogical tool. Quantitative data and coding of open response questions revealed that instructors overall considered humor to be an integral part of their teaching plan and that humor relaxes students, contributes to a more enjoyable classroom climate, and helps students make content connections, in both traditional and web based classes. Despite general acceptance, the feedback suggested instructors could benefit from targeted training in how to effectively and consistently use humor as a teaching strategy, particularly in their online courses.

Introduction

The ideas of humor and higher education are not often mentioned in the same conversation, but a persistent message from the research literature suggests that perhaps they should. With empirical evidence to support the contention that the use of humor in educational settings is related to positive student perceptions of the instructor and the learning environment (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez & Liu, 2011; Garner, 2006; James, 2004; Kher, Molstad, & Donahue, 1999), a foundation and rationale are certainly established to further consider the expanded use of humor as a critical element of any instructor's classroom orientation and arsenal. According to Jones (2014), the use of humor as a viable pedagogical approach is on the rise in almost every discipline. Such an inclusion may be particularly pertinent at this time, given the undeniable shift in higher education dynamics as more and more colleges and universities witness unprecedented growth in their web-based programs, both fully online and blended. Indeed, with 6.7 million students taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014), a need exists to continually reexamine the pedagogical strategies we employ to establish social presence and a sense of community within the higher education classroom, in both its traditional and web-based formats.

The purpose of this current study was to determine the attitudes of professors within a College of Education toward the use of humor as a component of effective teaching.

As leaders of several key committees within our College charged with exploring academic innovations; student recruitment and retention at all levels; and distance learning quality assurance, our curiosity in this topic has been impelled by several factors. First, a proliferation of alternative delivery systems has unquestionably taken place within our university that has resulted in an expansion from 1,130 students taking at least one online course in fall 2005 to a total of 5,771 in the spring of 2016. Concurrently, the number of online courses offered has burgeoned from 82 in 2005 to 471 in 2016 (Educational Outreach, 2016). Second, our university's most recent strategic plan distinctly underscores the premise that our vision rests with faculty who are passionate about student-centered learning. Third, like many other institutions, our university has faced unprecedented competition from both within and beyond our geographic region, and we are literally vying for each student tuition dollar. Frankly, our classes must now be "sold" to students as commodities and we must cater directly to the consumer's needs and desires. A very strong correlation has been established between the student/teacher relationship and overall student satisfaction in predicting the contentment level of students (Arambewela, Hall, & Zuhair, 2006; Palgrem & Chandratilake, 2011).

Our primary motivation, however, is that our students are preparing for careers in P-12 teaching and other helping professions and we place great importance on the exposure of those students to faculty who model learner-centered dispositions and promote interaction and active engagement, regardless of whether the course is taught on campus or online. Humor can be described as a communicative *attitude* for teachers (Chiasson, 2002) and the National Education Association extols that humor fuels engagement and helps students learn (McNeely, 2015). Depending upon the reaction of our instructors, humor could ultimately be elevated in importance as a defendable competency within the teacher preparation program. So, when reflecting upon all these factors in total, we saw a great need to be proactive and collect data from our College faculty in an effort to better understand existing practices and identify elements for potential change and progression. College administrators up and down the hierarchy expend considerable effort, time, and expense on professional development, guest lecturers, workshops, seminars, retreats, and "book talks" on "flavor of the month" topics of fleeting relevance, yet may overlook the potential of something as seemingly innocuous as humor.

Further evidence was revealed when Delaney, Johnson, Johnson, & Treslan (2010) released their *Students' Perceptions of Effective Teaching in Higher Education*, which derived

from 330 students a set of definitions that describe nine characteristics and instructor behaviors that demonstrate effectiveness in teaching both on-campus and at a distance via the web. Instructors who are effective teachers are respectful of students, knowledgeable, approachable, engaging, communicative, organized, responsive, professional, and humorous. Students indicated that the nine characteristics were consistent across modes of delivery. Most telling, the inclusion of 'humorous' as a trait desired of a teaching professor was consistent with the findings of Feldmann (1988) who conducted a similar study over 20 years prior. To this end, the seminal work of Barr and Tagg (1996) argued that the culture and structure of our colleges should undergo a paradigm shift from the instruction paradigm to the learning paradigm in which faculty become the designers of powerful learning environments and reconfigure the ways that they interact with students. Implicit in this analysis is the importance of the teaching environment, where attributes like humor can play a role.

The pedagogical potential of humor is certainly not a new concept. Early literature from the 1970s began to refer to college teaching as the "highest form of show biz" and called for instructors to develop a deep sense of humor (Miller, 1979, p.10). Similarly, Lowman (1994) declared that a teacher is also a performer and motivator. Such a portrayal, however, is not shared universally across higher education. Atherton (2002) insisted that entertainment should be an epiphenomenon or a spin-off from the achievement of learning, not a route to it. A potential consequence of education as entertainment is that students may develop the belief that learning is easy (Olson & Clough, 2003). Thus, we sought to investigate the perceptions of our faculty toward the use of humor as a component of effective teaching and ascertain the extent and manner to which it is utilized in their respective classes. Correspondingly, if professors were to perceive humor-embedded instruction as undesirable or ineffective, the particular aspects of humor usage failing to garner support or show advantages for students could be further isolated and examined.

Practitioner action research is highly appropriate for an investigation of this nature where experience suggests that significant modifications to the traditional paradigm of higher education may be required (Nunes & McPherson, 2003). Based upon the perspective that action research can be viewed as a tension between forces that leads to personal, professional and social change (Riel, 2010), we sought to conduct a study wherein we could inform our individual practices while likewise encouraging colleagues to engage in critical reflection for the overall betterment

of an entire College. Our approach is rooted in co-operative inquiry, with a positionality of "insider collaborating with other insiders," as described by Gordon (2008), Heron (1996), and Reason (1994). Educational action research enables practitioners to critique structures which shape their practice and provides the power to negotiate change within the system that maintains them (Elliott, 1991). Teachers and their collaborators should gather multiple perspectives on the situation in question through a systematic collection and evaluation of information that affects and results from practice (Day, 1999; Elliott, 2003). Hence, we were intentional about underscoring the collaborative nature of practitioner research as we considered our own responsibilities with teaching, distance education, and professional development and merged those with the experiences and perspectives of all faculty members within the various departments that comprise our College. Findings from this inquiry will also be shared with P-12 partners, both in the field, and those who comprise our advisory committees, as we work with local classroom educators and administrators to produce the most efficient and comprehensively developed teacher candidates who possess the qualities and dispositions that will allow them to excel at their craft when placed in highly diverse environments.

Conceptual Framework

Our focus on the pedagogical role of humor is grounded in the work of Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) who developed the Inventory of Humor Orientation, which seeks to measure those communication-based personality traits that allow people to enact humorous messages and perceive themselves as humorous across a variety of situations. To that end, Aylor and Opplinger (2003) revealed that a high humor orientation has the ability to reduce psychological distance both inside and outside of the classroom. Students who perceive an instructor as high in humor orientation were more likely to initiate communication with that instructor. Moreover, students were more apt to discuss personal concerns with a high-humor orientation instructor, which leads to a more meaningful teacher-student interpersonal relationship. This ability of humor to potentially create closeness is connected to "immediacy," or the perception of physical and psychological closeness between student and instructor.

We were also influenced by Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin (2010) and their advancement of Instructor Humor Processing Theory (IHPT), which states that learning results from the ability of appropriate humor to create positive affect and attention, leading to greater motivation on the

part of students to process course material in effortful ways. Wanzer et al. argued that humorous messages influence learning outcomes when students recognize that humor has taken place. According to IHPT, a student's recognition of humorous stimuli stems from incongruity in instructional messages that gets resolved and accurately interpreted. Such a contention is not dissimilar to incongruity theory of humor, which involves a contrast between something solemn or dignified, such as traditional classroom instruction, and something trivial or disreputable, such as the introduction of humor into that traditional instruction (Monro, 1988). Laughter is a way of acknowledging this incongruity between the conceptions that students hold in their minds and what happens to upset their expectations. Such internal incongruity influences informational recall in a positive manner (Summerfelt, Hannah, Lippman, Louis, & Hyman, Jr., 2010).

A Look at the Literature

Much has been written about the positive role that humor can play in the college classroom. It can reduce classroom anxiety (Shibinski & Martin, 2010; Lems 2011), assist students in retaining the material (Garner 2006), and culminate in higher evaluation scores for the professor (Skinner, 2010). Garner (2006) also investigated the psychological effects of laughter in the classroom and posited that humor can aid learning through improved respiration and circulation.

Humor and the Student

Students reported that humor makes teachers more likeable, facilitates learning of course material, lowers tension, boosts morale, and increases attentiveness (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004). Humor can bridge the gap between the teacher and the students by putting students at ease (Baid & Lambert, 2010). This positive influence may stem from humor's ability to entertain students, alleviate anxiety related to the learning environment, create a positive academic climate, and increase both student motivation and learning (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011).

In an earlier study, a sample of 161 students enrolled in statistics and psychology courses were divided into two groups, with one group experiencing humor and the other group receiving no intentional humor. Using ANOVA, the final exam scores revealed significantly higher scores in the group receiving the humor (Ziv, 1988). Similarly, Garner (2006) randomly divided 117

undergraduate students at a four-year university into two groups to review three pre-recorded one-hour lectures on the topic of research methods and statistics. Both groups saw the same digitally recorded information on the topic by the same instructor. One group, however, saw a version of the lecture in which a humorous story, example, or metaphor had been inserted at the beginning of the lecture and at points approximately 15 and 30 minutes into the talk. Participants in the "humor group" recalled and retained more information than the control group that saw only conventional presentations.

Berk's (1996) three-year study used student ratings to evaluate the effectiveness of 10 systematic strategies for using humor as a teaching tool: 1) humorous material on syllabi; 2) descriptors, cautions, and warnings on handouts; 3) opening jokes; 4) dramatizations/skits; 5) spontaneous humor; 6) humorous questions; 7) humorous examples; 8) humorous problem sets; 9) humorous review games; 10) humorous material on exams. The Humor Effectiveness Evaluation (HEE) was developed to determine those forms of humor rated highly by students and those rated as less effective. Eight incidental samples of students (n=316) enrolled in three undergraduate and five graduate introductory statistics courses at the University's School of Nursing were selected over the three year period. The undergraduate classes rated all of the strategies as "very effective" with humorous review games receiving an "extremely effective." The graduate students rated all of the strategies as "extremely effective" with humorous review games receiving a "very effective."

Humor and the Instructor

Humor has been cited as one of the essential characteristics of a good teacher (Horng, Hong, ChanLin, Chang, & Chu, 2005). Even an instructor who does not use humor but would like to accrue its benefits in class, can use the humor of others—by sharing cartoons, comics, or video clips (Weimer, 2013). To a large extent the literature has focused on the pedagogical role of humor as it pertains to classroom lecturing. Jones (2007), for example, insisted that lectures are often ineffective in engaging students and that balancing the serious aspects of teaching with the desires of students for excitement and inspiration is an appropriate way of creating a motivating and lively teaching environment. To that end, transmitting knowledge through narrative and informal methods, such as storytelling or humor, can generate and maintain interest and deep learning in students (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Morton, 2009). The use of humor in

lecturing requires the maintenance of balance between purposefully engaging humor and irrelevant comedy (Baid & Lambert, 2010). Irrelevant comedy can lead to students being falsely satisfied without/or with little academic gains. Similarly, excessive use of humor in lectures and other course activities detracts from the subject matter being communicated (Lei, Cohen, & Russler, 2010).

While the literature makes it clear that humor is an abstract concept with no single agreed definition (Goldstein, 1972), attempts have made to establish classifications or typologies of humor utilized by instructors. Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, and Smith (2006) collected 712 student-generated examples of classroom humor to create four main categories: humor related to class material, humor unrelated to class material, unplanned humor, and self-disparaging humor. Hativa (2001) characterized humor as verbal (wordplays, funny stories, puns, content related jokes, comic irony, metaphor, hyperbole, metonymy, riddles, funny examples/stories), non-verbal (facial expressions, gestures) or a combination of the two (impersonation, parody, satire, monologue and skit).

Gruber, Lowrie, Brodowsky, Reppel, Voss, and Chowdhury (2012) used the Kano model of satisfaction to investigate professor characteristics that create student satisfaction as well as those attributes that can cause their dissatisfaction. Kano questionnaires were distributed to 104 undergraduate students at a university in the Southwest and to 147 undergraduate students at a university in the Midwest of the United States. The findings revealed the importance of the personality of professors and the engagement of students through effective use of real world examples accompanied by appropriate doses of humor. Significant factors that can predict students' perceptions of an instructor's effectiveness include professor-student rapport, student engagement, and perceived humor of the instructor (Richmond, Berglund, Epelbaum, & Klein, 2015).

Walker (2008) conducted a 15-year longitudinal study of pre-service Education majors in which he asked traditional and non- traditional college students to respond to the prompt "What were the qualities of the most memorable teacher who encouraged you to teach?" According to Walker: "Semester after semester, year after year, a common theme emerged in the essays and class discussions of what makes a good teacher. Students emphasized the personal traits of memorable teachers rather than academic qualifications" (p.64). Based on the comments, Walker concluded that memorable teachers share 12 important attributes, of which "have a sense of

humor" ranked in the ninth position. "They bring humor to the everyday classroom" was a common response by the college students.

Berk (1998) identified three primary reasons why many higher education instructors are reluctant to use humor. Because humor is not part of any formal curriculum, professors have not received any training in how to use it. Second, there exists a misconception that the skills of a comedian are needed in order to engage in humor. Finally, it is a widely held belief that teaching is a serious business and they view humor as "frivolous, undignified, and demeaning to the profession" (p. 20).

Shortcomings of Humor

Although the literature is not as plentiful when it comes to pointing out the potential downside of using humor, Baid and Lambert (2010) reported that inappropriate humor can actually create a hostile classroom environment and trigger a decline in student self esteem. Intentional negative use of humor, or even unintentional misuse, can be alienating and subversive (Rothwell, Siharath, Bell, Nguyen, & Baker, 2011). In another study, student respondents contributed 512 examples of inappropriate humor that fell into categories like: disparaging humor that targets students, disparaging humor that targets others, and offensive or provocative humor (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006). Interestingly, the students considered self-disparaging humor by the instructor to be both appropriate and inappropriate, depending upon the context and the extent to which it is carried out. The literature also provides evidence that some students could be unacquainted with humorous references in class due to cultural differences. Instructors have to be aware of unintended consequences and interpretations of humor across cultural lines (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015).

Summary

The literature, while somewhat sporadic and, quite often, anecdotal, is decidedly favorable toward the use of humor as a pedagogical tool. This present study, apart from its potential to provide useful data to improve our own quality of instruction, is unique because it examines the subject of classroom humor from the faculty perspective. Little has been reported on teacher perceptions of humor. Much more has been uncovered about student expectations

regarding humor. We addressed this disparity by asking university faculty across an entire College to directly share their attitudes on humor and its impact on teaching and learning.

Method

Participants and Setting

Our university services over 16,000 students in a tri-state region. The University has approximately 2,000 faculty and staff. The electronic survey (and subsequent "reminder email") was disseminated during the fall semester 2015 to all 65 instructors within the College of Education and Human Services, which includes the departments of Teacher Education; Counseling, Social Work and Leadership; and Kinesiology and Health.

Design and Procedures

This study employed a mixed methods approach consistent with the convergence triangulation design described by Creswell (2013) and Denzin (1978) in which quantitative and qualitative data provide complementary aspects of the same phenomenon. Denzin (1978) recommended the use of between-method triangulation, contending that by utilizing mixed methods the result will be a convergence upon the truth" (p. 14). Further, Denzin (1978) isolated three outcomes that arise from triangulation: convergence, inconsistency, and contradiction. The objective was to collect data that were robust and comprehensive. The electronic survey was a researcher-generated instrument, which blended a quantitative component in the form of 12 fixed response items (four of which were demographic in nature) with a distinct qualitative element accomplished through four narrative response questions that encouraged detailed and personalized answers. In addition, each quantitative item also solicited further comments or elaboration. Such data were used to refine or elaborate on the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2005). For the purposes of the questionnaire, "humor" was defined as: anything appropriate and suitable the instructor purposefully initiates that students find funny or amusing. "Appropriate" and "suitable" mean that the humor is not patently offensive and/or the humor is perceived by the instructor as fitting and proper within the classroom setting. An outline of the essential questions is found in Appendix A.

Initial open coding, indexing, and interpreting were performed manually, leading to selective coding and content analysis of the narrative comments provided by the respondents.

Categories were established by using words or phrases to represent the topics and patterns (Bogdan & Bicklin, 2003). Written comments were first organized into categories and analyzed for contextual or thematic uses of phrases and keywords. Categories were then organized into a schema used as the basis for writing findings. Each participant's codes were also compared to the other's checking for commonalities and disparities to produce a matrix of data patterns. Confirmability and credibility were enhanced through corroboration from multiple, independent informants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The method was deductive in nature as no specific hypothesis testing occurred. Because the self-reported items were analyzed separately, a scale was not developed.

Results

A total of 31 instructors (48%) from the College responded to the questionnaire. Response numbers fluctuated for individual survey items, with various respondents skipping particular questions. Twenty two (71%) of the participants were female and 9 (29%) were male. Table 1 reveals the environments in which the instructors teach, current student classifications taught, and the years of college teaching experience.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Respondents

Variable	Number of Faculty (n=31)
Teaching Environment	
Face-to-Face	29 (94%)
Online	20 (65%)
Hybrid/Blended	18 (58%)
Student Classification Taught	
Undergraduate	28 (90%)
Graduate	27 (87%)
Doctoral	4 (13%)
More than 15	13 (43%)
Years Teaching	
0-3	3 (10%)
4-6	6 (20%)
7-10	5 (17%)
11-15	4 (10%)
More than 15	13(43%)

As presented in Table 2, instructors were asked to share their attitude toward the statement "Humor is an integral part of my teaching strategy." A combined 19 instructors were in agreement with the idea of incorporating humor as an essential component of their teaching strategy, although, in the narrative comments, several respondents minimized the intentionality of their efforts: "I don't believe I use humor in a purposeful manner," "I don't purposefully think about incorporating humor but I use it in my class when it is natural," and "It is usually spontaneous, not planned." Others were more deliberate about their attempts to use humor. According to one participant, "I have always used humor as a means of establishing rapport and creating a positive environment in which students can learn." Another affirmed: "Serious topics are better processed by students when a bit of humor or a funny story can be added." Instructors who provided a dissenting view contributed comments such as: "Why should I turn my class into a joke?" and "I take my classes and teaching seriously as do my students. I don't see a place for this contrived nonsense."

Table 2. Humor is an Integral Part of My Teaching Strategy

Rating	Number of Faculty (n=28)
Strongly Disagree	4 (14%)
Disagree	2(7%)
Unsure	3 (11%)
Agree	11 (39%)
Strongly Agree	8 (29%)

Table 3 displays that 24 instructors expressed agreement with the notion that humor creates a relaxing environment and offered comments such as: "This is a primary reason for my use of humor, to facilitate student engagement and attention in a relaxed environment," "Humor gives me a social presence that balances my professional presence," and "In my experience, humor, specifically self-deprecating humor, can serve to "humanize" instructors, making them more approachable and relatable, which certainly supports a relaxing classroom." Some of the respondents expressed concern that humor could have the opposite effect: "You have to be careful as younger people are more sensitive to sarcasm," and "Humor creates an unnatural discomfort and can cause cultural misunderstandings."

Table 3. Humor Creates a Relaxing Classroom Environment for Students

Rating	Number of Faculty (n=28)
Strongly Disagree	4 (14%)
Disagree	0 (0%)
Unsure	0 (0%)
Agree	12 (43%)
Strongly Agree	12 (43%)

In regard to humor making the classroom more relaxing for students, Table 4 shows a combined 82% of faculty members were in agreement. Respondents supplied supportive comments such as "Whenever I talk with a student who is experiencing difficulties I begin with humor," and "Humor gives student an opportunity to re-focus." While a large majority (82%) of the instructors were in agreement that humor reduces student anxiety, many of the narrative comments were in contrast to this assertion: "It can cause increased anxiety and gives the professor the reputation of not taking the course seriously enough. I don't want to be known as a joke. I take my profession seriously," "It actually can increase student anxiety," and "It's only a temporary fix for anxiety." One respondent expanded on these ideas: "Students won't be able to use humor when taking any of the standardized tests necessary for certification so using the humor in these situations would not be useful. A more helpful approach would be to teach students how to manage their anxiety in stressful situations."

Table 4. Humor Reduces Student Anxiety in Dealing with Difficult Material and Testing Situations

Rating	Number of Faculty (n=28)
Strongly Disagree	3 (11%)
Disagree	1(4%)
Unsure	1 (4%)
Agree	16 (57%)
Strongly Agree	7 (25%)

Table 5 reveals that 57% of instructors expressed agreement with the assertion that humor helps students remember key concepts and entered supportive comments such as "Humor is one way to increase depth of processing and thereby improve long term recall of important information" and "Used effectively, humor can transform learning into an 'experience,' and make the lessons more memorable." One participant remarked: "It's better than them falling

asleep or not attending class." Still, a combined 21% of respondents expressed disagreement with the idea and 21% were unsure. Written contributions in opposition included: "It distracts from the content being taught," and "Humor and comedy cause the students to focus on the joke rather than the content. This creates a lackadaisical atmosphere for both the instructor and the students. Not appropriate at any level of education." An instructor made a one-word assessment: "Ridiculousness!"

Table 5. Humor Helps Students Remember Key Concepts

Rating	Number of Faculty (n=28)
Strongly Disagree	4 (14%)
Disagree	2 (7%)
Unsure	6 (21%)
Agree	9 (32%)
Strongly Agree	7 (25%)

According to Table 6, a preponderance of instructors was in agreement that humor increases student interest and excitement for the material. According to one respondent:

When I was an U.G. student, I took a speech course in which the instructor used a text he wrote. It was a huge class with grad assistants teaching the "lab" portion of the course. I had gotten behind on my reading of the text and was cramming for a final exam when I began to fall asleep. To keep me awake, I started to read the comics the instructor had inserted in to the text to cover certain concepts. I aced the exam because so many of the questions related to the comics. That sold me on the use of humor to support learning.

Said another: "It really depends on the topic." A respondent added: "It might increase excitement, but not learning."

Table 6. Humor Increases Student Interest in and Excitement for the Material Being Taught

Rating	Number of Faculty (n=28)
Strongly Disagree	4 (14%)
Disagree	1 (4%)
Unsure	1 (4%)
Agree	11 (39%)
Strongly Agree	11 (39%)

As depicted in Table 7, the level of agreement with the belief that all content areas can benefit from humor was strong, yet 25% of instructors disagreed and 21% were unsure. Representative comments included: "Humor can help students keep important but somewhat dry information in a context that improves learning," "Everyone needs humor in their lives, and that includes your academic life," "I believe humor has nothing to do with whether material is learned - it has to do with whether or not the instructor knows the material, knows the students, and is able to effectively engage the class," and "I don't have time for jokes in my class."

Table 7. All Content Areas Can Benefit from the Instructor's Use of Humor

Rating	Number of Faculty (n=28)
Strongly Disagree	4 (14%)
Disagree	3 (11%)
Unsure	6 (21%)
Agree	9 (32%)
Strongly Agree	6 (21%)

Table 8 points out there was a high level of disagreement with the assertion that a teacher's credibility is comprised when humor is used. One instructor argued, "Sometimes the anecdotes we share of our personal/professional experiences are funny. When we share them, students see that we have experience/expertise in the area based on the stories we share." Another remarked, "On the contrary, it often evidences a relaxed, comfortable state that can suggest mastery." Differing viewpoints included: "The focus should be on the class not on the teacher as a clown," and "I don't need gimmicks."

Table 8. A Teacher's Credibility as a Content Expert is Compromised When a Teacher Uses Humor

Rating	Number of Faculty (n=28)
Strongly Disagree	12 (43%)
Disagree	11 (39%)
Unsure	0 (0%)
Agree	3 (11%)
Strongly Agree	2 (7%)

Table 9 discloses that a combined 75% of respondents disagreed that students undervalue the importance of a lesson if humor is used. An instructor made the qualification that such a scenario would not occur "unless humor is overused," while another insisted, "Students see

through the charade." A respondent argued, "Much of the content-related humor I use requires that students have read and understood the material. Otherwise, they don't pick up my humor references. I think it makes them appreciate the lesson even more."

Table 9. Students Undervalue the Importance of a Lesson When a Teacher Uses Humor

Rating	Number of Faculty (n=28)
Strongly Disagree	9 (32%)
Disagree	12(43%)
Unsure	2 (7%)
Agree	0 (0%)
Strongly Agree	5 (18%)

Narrative Responses

Faculty members were asked to provide examples of how they have used humor successfully in both face-to-face and web-based courses, and also to describe instances where the use of humor was inappropriate or counterproductive. Sixty one percent of the instructors provided responses to the open-ended questions.

Successful Use of Humor

The use of humor that was most pervasive throughout the instructors' comments involved the sharing of humorous stories with students, specifically stories of personal experiences. Some examples included: "I include humorous stories about my interactions with parents, teachers and students," "I attempt to provide real-life examples of struggles I faced when I was a practitioner or that other professionals face that illustrate the need for whatever we are learning but the stories are also usually funny," "Most often these are off-the-cuff, not planned, stories. Often they are of a personal (to me) nature -- commentary on my naiveté as an elementary school teacher, for example, or my "prowess" as an instructor," "Telling stories from my life to reinforce a classroom lesson," and "I tell stories about what children do and say in classrooms."

Self-deprecating humor was also a dominant theme that emerged from the instructors' comments. "Self deprecating humor lets students know that even though I have high expectations for their performance, I do not take myself or my personal opinions overly serious," and "When I make a mistake I make a face and laugh at myself."

Successful Use of Humor in Online Environment

When asked to contribute examples of humor that had been used successfully in an online environment and the tools they selected to convey the humor, the prevailing comments were focused on the *lack* of such experiences: "I have not done this," "I can't think of any," "This is an area I would need to develop to be an effective instructor online," "I would use more if I could figure out how to integrate it," and "I do not use humor in my online classroom." One instructor mentioned, "I do postings in which I appear in costumes," while another said, "At the end of my introduction to the class video I did a small dance in my chair for their upcoming graduation." The components that were mentioned by several respondents dealt with the use of podcasts and videos (particularly movies and YouTube).

Inappropriate or Counterproductive Uses of Humor

The instructors were likewise asked to describe examples of humor they had used that they now perceive as inappropriate or counterproductive. The most of-occurring examples involved sarcasm or humor at a particular student's expense: "I used too much sarcasm and came across as demeaning. I did more of this my first semester teaching and realized it after reading my evaluations" and "I didn't mean anything by it, but I poked a little fun at a quiet student who was not participating." One respondent offered the following instance where the humor was unproductive:

> Humor is developmental. I used a video of a female comedienne giving a rant on what moms do played to the *William Tell Overture*. Moms think it's hysterical. No one cracked a smile; it dawned on me that the audience was too young to appreciate the life experience. It was a wake- up call for me on developmental humor. It was inappropriate   for the audience.

A faculty member provided a general indictment: "Humor in the classroom is always inappropriate and counterproductive."

Discussion and Implications

The overall results from course instructors suggested a general acceptance of humor as a pedagogical tool with most respondents expressing agreement or strong agreement with the overall premise. Large percentages of the faculty members declared that humor is an integral part

of their teaching strategy and that humor can serve to relax students, alleviate anxiety toward difficulty material and testing, bolster retention of content, and generate excitement for the material being taught. They did not express concern that humor could damage their own credibility or diminish the importance of the content they teach. Although the sheer number of instructors who expressed disagreement with the value of teaching with humor was small, those participants advanced a pattern of thought that certainly should not be dismissed.

Where We Are Now

The findings from this study have certainly provided a starting point and baseline for us to better understand how the use of humor is currently perceived by the faculty across our College. As noted, data suggest we presently have two categories of faculty. We have faculty who have expressed support for humor and may be receptive to ideas on how to expand their repertoire and implement humor in a more deliberate and sustained fashion. We also have faculty who appear very resistant to humor, but could be amenable to receiving further information about humor's place in higher education and ways to incorporate humor without sacrificing credibility and rigor. After all, if professors can be "taught" how to use new software or how to participate in co-teaching, it is only reasonable that professors can, at the very minimum, be *introduced* to the various methods for including humor as systematic teaching tool.

Those who opposed the use of humor in teaching provided comments that suggested a tone of strong disregard. The preponderance of open responses that were critical of humor as a pedagogical tool made references to "clown, "jokes," "charade" and "gimmicks" which could suggest a lack of familiarity with the empirical literature on the benefits of humor or a viewpoint that classroom humor is inherently slapstick or equated to exaggerated horseplay. No precise reasons or experiences were offered as a basis for the aversion to humor.

Participants were resolute that there are indeed appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor in the college classroom. Such a concern is easily consistent with the literature and reinforced by Hovelynck and Peeters (2003) when they warned of the possible negative consequences of mockery, sarcasm, ridicule, and inappropriate, offensive, or aggressive humor. This type of humor may be particularly harmful if it marginalizes or disempowers particular groups or individuals. Instructors must avoid attempts at humor involving sensitive topics like disability, appearance, ethnicity, family or any such identifiers that students could find offensive. In such

instances the student does not have the option of leaving the situation and must endure the ridicule (Harris, 1989).

Faculty acknowledged much of their humor was spontaneous rather than intentional or systematic. Such "spur of the moment" humor can be very valuable in establishing rapport with students, yet to consistently derive benefits from humor-embedded instruction it is advantageous to think of humor in the same terms one would approach any other "best practice" technique. The instructors need to commit to using humor at more regular intervals in order to receive the desired result, or, as Powers (2005) advocated, for maximum effect, humor should be very well thought out and employed deliberately. While the movement of web-based instruction into the mainstream of higher education has been aggressive, the study participants acknowledged the lack of humor they implant in their online courses and were able to cite only a podcast or video clip as the vehicles drawn upon to deliver such humor. As we consider professional development opportunities for our faculty members, erasing this deficit would rate as a strong concern. James (2004) observed that "Because humor is one of the major traits of the best, most effective teachers, it is a characteristic that all teachers should want to hone, practice, and nurture, regardless of medium" (p. 94). It is true that spontaneous "humor moments" are much more difficult to attain in an online class as opposed to the physical classroom, but the web-based environment actually offers greater possibilities for one-on-one humorous interactions between the instructor and the student. The humor can be individualized rather than geared toward an entire room of students. James (2004) pointed out that crafting personal correspondence that attempts to be humorous takes more time than simply being utilitarian, but the connections made with students are worth the extra effort.

Where We Are Going

It is our opinion that our instructors could benefit from targeted training in how to effectively use humor as a teaching strategy, particularly in their online courses. Data from this study will allow us to bring several recommendations to the three chairs within our College as well as the Dean. We also plan to disseminate the findings at a colleague-to-colleague faculty conference sponsored by the University. When considering where to best offer professional development opportunities, we will use the data to establish what strategies the faculty already use and areas where they already have a degree of confidence. The most oft-cited examples of

humor usage dealt with the sharing of funny stories with students. The respondents explained that stories serve to "humanize" the instructor by showing common struggles and establishing a social presence with students that goes beyond the typical me/them orientation. Pollio and Humphreys (1996) found that the connection established between the instructor and the student was indeed critical to effective teaching. Interestingly, a "fun" delivery by university instructors (which includes humor, creative examples, and storytelling) was deemed to be more important to students than "fun" activities and leads to increases in overall student engagement (Tews, Jackson, Ramsay, & Michel, 2015). So, the comfort level of our faculty with sharing humorous stories can serve as a foundation on which to build and expand.

Despite the overall high level of agreement, there was a clear indication that the actual use of humor was somewhat limited in scope. While 68% of respondents agreed that humor is an integral part of their teaching strategy, the examples provided were imprecise or confined to the aforementioned storytelling, occasional video (which typically relies on the humor of others), and self-deprecation. Perhaps what was most telling about the instructor responses was the lack of concrete examples of how they have used humor and how it was successful, or not successful. The open ended responses dealt in generalities that did not appear to draw from personal experiences. Comments like "Humor can help students keep important but somewhat dry information in a context that improves learning" or "Used effectively, humor can transform learning into an 'experience,' and make the lessons more memorable" are sweeping statements, but they do not provide the "for instance" detail that would suggest the instructor has practical familiarity with specific strategies that have been employed in their classroom setting. For this reason, we suggest faculty members begin to amass a collection of humorous materials like jokes, quotations, comic strips, clips, music, pop culture references (being sure to avoid outdated icons that may not be familiar to the modern student) and analogies that will provide arrows in the quiver for those instances when a dose of humor could serve as an emollient or an impetus to learning. Even something as simple as decorating one's office door with witty materials can send a positive and inviting message to students (Petruso, 2006).

We believe it is important that all instructors recognize that humor need not be equated with "pie-in-the-face" absurdity or rapid fire stand-up comedy. Berk (2003) contended there are low, medium, and high-risk humor strategies to meet the needs and personalities of individual professors. Low-risk ventures involve humorous additions to syllabi, assignments, or quiz items.

Moderate examples might include humorous questions posed to students or humorous examples or exaggerations during a demonstration or discussion, while high-risk attempts would comprise actual joke telling, skits, role plays, or game show parodies. The first step we will undertake is to assist our colleagues in overcoming the impressions that using humor requires a special talent or that humor is indecorous. Humor within an educational setting has a lower expectation threshold to begin with because, while students may *desire* that professors express a sense of humor, they certainly do not expect it. Therefore, any endeavor at humor, even puns, pauses, and simple word-play, will be welcomed by most students and they will recognize the instructor is seeking to make class more pleasurable and interesting (LoSchiavo & Shatz, 2005).

Humor Online

Admittedly, the online medium is very text-driven and the instructor must recognize the tendency of many students to be literal-minded as to what appears on screen. For this reason, visual humor is especially effective in online courses, and cartoons, illustrations, and photographs, can easily be integrated throughout the course. Creating videos for online classes will allow students to see one's body language and facial expressions that are so critical to nonverbal communication. To spur creativity among the faculty, we would like to offer mini-professional development "academies" on the use of humor, particularly in web-based and blended courses. The training would cover course design, development, and delivery. Injecting humor into an online course is actually part of a wider strategy to develop what Conaway and Schiefelbein (2016) referred to as an instructor's 'digital personality.' Instructors would learn strategies for matching incremental humor to the goals and objectives of the course in order to ensure that the humor is linked to the subject matter so as to enhance student retention of the content. If students recall the humor, they may recall the concept or theory the professor was attempting to illustrate (Wanzer, 2002). Screen-capturing tools like Screencast-o-matic and Jing allow instructors to easily provide voice-over to Powerpoint content, images, or student work so that humor can be added to any applicable presentation. Such presentations can range from historic images and maps to statistics problems and current events. Instructors can include narration and a personal touch of humor makes learning relevant for students (Conaway & Schiefelbein, 2016). Many of the audio and visual tools are available open source and in multiple forms.

Further, we recommend that instructors be given an opportunity to pilot their newly developed humor using fellow instructors as students. During this phase instructors will receive feedback on how the humor was perceived in the online delivery. We will encourage faculty to design their online courses or programs in collaboration with our instructional designers to better develop innovative hands-on simulations, animations, and educational gaming that incorporate humor and other better methods of engaging students in online courses through collaborative learning. We will make available individual courses as "exemplary courses" that demonstrate effective uses of humor in online teaching.

Our own initial efforts to act as catalysts for change have already included adaptations made within our personal online courses. Each new module already contained a brief audio introduction, but adding a few humorous lines to those introductions may now serve to better engage the student and "de-fang" potentially difficult content. For example, when launching a unit on research statistics, such as the t-test, the following has been included: "This week we will be discussing some of the most commonly used statistics in educational research. We will begin with the t-test, and you can choose regular or decaffeinated, and with or without lemon." Adding some funny quotes and "top ten lists" have also helped to make our course sites more appealing and "attention-getting. "

Limitations and Future Research

Although 48% of instructors in our College responded to the questionnaire, which enabled us to recognize a broad trend across our faculty, there are still many instructors for which we received no input. Also, it would have been advantageous to segregate the data by departments in an effort to determine if faculty members from certain disciplines are more prone to humor than others. We deliberately did not filter the participant responses in this study in order to protect the identities of those instructors in certain departments within our College with lower faculty numbers. Another noted limitation of this study was the inability to address potential cultural differences as they relate to the use of humor. When considering future research, it would be extremely valuable to interview faculty across our College, perhaps in a focus group environment, in order to encourage reflection and to garner more in-depth reactions to the use of humor in various classrooms. We also plan to collect data from our students in an

effort to determine if there is a match or disconnect between the attitudes of the learners and faculty in the area of pedagogical humor.

Conclusions

While the intent of this practitioner-oriented study was not to generalize to a larger population, the data did corroborate many of the findings in the existing literature. Administrators and faculty members from other universities may also draw from this information and find commonalities with their own Colleges and departments. According to Williams (2000): "Aspects of a particular case can be seen to be instances of a broader recognizable set of features" (p. 131). As we strive to increase student learning, student interest, student satisfaction, and, thus, student recruitment and retention, we are encouraged by the attitudes of our faculty toward the use of humor as a pedagogical strategy. While it is certainly true that many of the perceived benefits of humor are likely rooted within larger frameworks of effective teaching behaviors, it was evident the faculty members recognized humor for its individual merits and for the role humor might play in creating a comfortable learning climate for students. We will use the feedback from this study, and the awareness that it raised about the topic, to assist faculty in gaining additional or, in some instances, new information about the advantages of bringing humor into their classes, whether they are taught face-to-face or online. In this same manner, we will also discuss the merits of "teaching through humor" with our P-12 counterparts as they likewise seek to establish school cultures that promote student motivation and success. Deiter (2000) asserted that humor deals with "how" to teach, but not "what" to teach. In the end, however, humor can be a teaching tool that increases the amount of "what" that is actually learned by the students. Those who interact with college students and/or aspiring P-12 teachers owe it to themselves to investigate the possibility that that a timely and appropriate use of humor might contribute to a happier student who appreciates the old adage that learning should be fun. Can we take a joke in higher education?

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Appendix A: Questions Asked of Faculty

Please indicate the following: Male Female	In which environment do you teach? Choose all that apply: Face to Face, Online, Hybrid	Please indicate the classification(s) of students you teach. Choose all that apply: Undergraduate, Graduate, Doctoral	Please indicate the number of years you have taught: 0-3, 4-6, 7-10, 11-15, More than 15
The use of humor is an integral part of my teaching strategy. Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D) Unsure (U) Agree (A) Strongly Agree (SA)	I believe the use of humor creates a relaxing classroom environment for students. Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D) Unsure (U) Agree (A) Strongly Agree (SA)	I believe the use of humor reduces student anxiety in dealing with difficult material and/or testing situations. Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D) Unsure (U) Agree (A) Strongly Agree (SA)	I believe students remember key concepts better when they associate them with instructionally appropriate humor. Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D) Unsure (U) Agree (A) Strongly Agree (SA)
I believe the use of humor increases student interest in and excitement for the material being taught. Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D) Unsure (U) Agree (A) Strongly Agree (SA)	I believe all content areas can benefit from the instructor's use of humor. Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D) Unsure (U) Agree (A) Strongly Agree (SA)	I believe a teacher's credibility as a content expert is compromised when a teacher uses humor. Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D) Unsure (U) Agree (A) Strongly Agree (SA)	I believe students undervalue the importance of a lesson when a teacher uses humor. Strongly Disagree (SD) Disagree (D) Unsure (U) Agree (A) Strongly Agree (SA)
Provide examples of humor you have used successfully in the face-to-face classroom.	Provide examples of humor you have used successfully in an online teaching environment.	Provide examples of instances where you believe humor was inappropriate or counterproductive.	Specific to online teaching, what tools do you use to convey the humor you deliver in the class?