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To Be or Not to Be...Humorous: Personalize and Perform Humor Mindfully

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Chapter 1: To Be or Not to Be...Humorous: Personalize and Perform Humor Mindfully – By Julie Artman

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First Clown: What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?

Second Clown: The gallows-maker; for that frame outlives a thousand tenants.

- Humor from *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, written around 1600

To be or not to be...humorous in the classroom—*that* is the question for instruction librarians.

To be or not to be...humorous in the classroom—*that* is the question for instruction librarians. Like Hamlet's infamous words, we, too, mindfully roll these thoughts and decisions around, envisioning positive and potentially negative interactions with our students. Humor can be a treacherous path to self-destruction under the watchful eye of students and faculty in our library instruction room. Or, using humor can support a joyful, caring, and engaging learning environment.

This chapter will address some of the pitfalls (and positive results) of using humor as part of your teaching method. We will explore the acting techniques of personalization and improvisation; and mindful tools to prepare mentally with attention, awareness, and intentionality. Key takeaways from mindfulness and the craft of acting will embolden you

to discover how to personalize your own sense of humor, and demonstrate authenticity, caring, and trust--critical factors for student acceptance and engagement--within the learning environment. You will not only survive the instruction session; you will also feel enlivened and more attuned to your teaching purpose during the process.

Hey, Why Can't I Be Funny Like Hamlet?

Maybe Hamlet is not a bowl of laughs, but his psychological journey is one that we can understand, recognizing in ourselves the same seeds of doubt and inaction which plague Hamlet. Let's begin our own self-discovery with the psychological underpinnings of how humor can go right or wrong in the classroom (Wanzer 2006).

First, know your audience. That is, your room full of students and possibly their professor as a guest. What is the subject you will be addressing? Is it serious? What about their instructor? Are they serious? Knowing something about your audience and taking this simple diagnostic can help you decide the general or overall tone of your presentation style. There is a significant difference between acting like the class clown and using humor selectively to warm up the audience. Even in the tragic play *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, humor is used to lighten the most serious of moments. What does the act of being funny or humorous do for the students?

Humor can be used as a means or method to reduce the anxiety of students (Walker 2006) and promote a positive, engaging learning environment (Smith 2017). Their anxiety may arise quite naturally because they are aware as they enter the library instruction room (or you attend their classroom) that there is an expectation of understanding what you will teach in a limited amount of time. Whether it's how to access scholarly resources through your library's website or deeper concepts of information literacy, humor can bridge their discomfort and

can alleviate some of yours. Knowing the appropriate timing and what type of humor to use are key strategies.

Become aware and watchful of various kinds of humor and uses. Some of these considerations center around visual images or cartoons appearing throughout your presentation. Our students are diverse, socially sophisticated, inclusive, and are individual thinkers with a deep range of emotions. There is no singular application of using humor to any group of students. In knowing this, you can begin to understand that a cartoon or a joke may not resonate in the same ways that they do for you. The standard acting note of 'less is more' does apply here. And, do not forget that sarcasm, wrapped in what you think is funny often has the impact of diminishing instead of expanding a friendly teaching environment. Sarcasm is rarely heard the same way you believe you are delivering it except, oftentimes, as hurtful.

Hamlet (and Laertes), Know Thyself!

Now that we understand a few positive results of humor in the classroom and a few potential missteps, we can explore how personalized humor can be enhanced. Specific acting techniques can prepare you to follow through with your personalized performance and selective humorous moments.

The classroom is your stage and the students are your audience or the students are the other character in your short play. This idea of making the students your acting partner can be comforting and lead you to devise ways of personalizing who you are and relating to who they are as well.

One exercise that you can use is helpful in the most uncomfortable of situations for an actor—the audition! And, don't we feel that we are constantly auditioning in front of the classroom, especially if we see a group of students only once? Imagine that the students are one person

that brings you joy or makes you feel calm. If you arrive in the space earlier, you can take in the empty classroom and imagine that this person or maybe a loving pet is there.

Bringing this to mind right before you introduce yourself may relax and ease some of your own anxiety. The students take this acting ‘cue’ from you and may begin to feel the same, disarmed by your calm and care. In this way, you have accomplished both—making the students feel comfortable and helping you to ease calmly into your full ‘performance’ ahead.

When we feel more relaxed in a potentially stressful situation of instructing students we don’t know well, we can redirect any negative emotional residue from our own anxiety or worry to focus on the task at hand: teaching. Another acting technique of analyzing character motivation and intention is helpful. Motivation is why the character acts the way they do, and intention can be thought of as the ‘what’ to do about it.

Your motivation can be tied to why you chose to be a teaching librarian or why you are teaching the specific topic for the class. The ‘what’ can be broken down to specific tasks that you will complete during your instruction and a way to keep you on track. In the end, each intentional action supports your overall motivation. You can think about dividing your instruction outline into these ‘beats’ of action or intention by identifying:

- What is the specific goal or objective or task: What am I doing in this moment? Use a verb to create each task. For example: *Welcoming* the students as they enter the classroom.
- How will I accomplish the task: What tactics am I using to achieve my goal or task? To welcome the students, I am positioned at the entrance to greet them as individuals.

Other tactics are the use of interactive exercises or pausing to initiate a discussion to continue to engage your students more fully. Your outline of actions or beats can be as detailed and helpful, as you like.

What is my motivation to complete this specific task (again, the ‘why’ complete this ‘beat’ of action)? By positioning myself at the entrance and welcoming each student, my overall motivation is to instill care and trust to students who don’t know me yet.

You can see how the acting process can help you perform with a sense of authenticity and care. In *Hamlet*, Polonius tells his son: “To Thine Own Self Be True” before Laertes begins his education at university—how appropriate here.

If Only Hamlet Acted Mindfully?

By achieving a personalized and personable demeanor with clear intentions and a supported motivation, you are ready to meet each moment of your instruction with humor mindfully. Mindfulness has become quite helpful for librarians. Mindfulness can play a part to cultivate non-judgment, openness, and curiosity during the exchanges between you and your students which may be unexpected, surprising, go well or not so well.

Mindfulness is one tool and skill that we can develop; teaching and showing up in personalized, authentic ways to help the students. Simply, mindfulness is the ability to pay attention to our present moment experience with a sense of balance, kindness, and acceptance. Mindfulness allows us to question, investigating solutions to our challenging thoughts and emotions. It is this attention and awareness that can lead to a greater sense of purpose and well-being (Holzel 2013; Lazar 2005; Tang 2007).

How Do We Practice Mindfulness?

There are many freely available online mindfulness resources, especially now. Take a tour of UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center online to begin a mindfulness practice. Or peruse several books published by *mindful* librarians (Henry 2015; Owens 2019). Acting and mindfulness blend in several ways. The actor hones their mental, emotional, physical tools to act fully aware, attentive, and present during rehearsal and performance. One mindful exercise used by actors is listening to sounds. This exercise focuses on the sense of hearing, to rest in present moment awareness, and fully engage in the sense experience of sound. As an instruction librarian, you can do the same by arriving early to your instruction classroom, if possible. Or, this exercise can be done in any space.

Sitting in a chair, close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. If not, with eyes open, gaze softly on a point of focus in front of you. You may open your eyes at any point of the exercise and adjust your sitting posture for comfort.

Notice the sounds inside or outside the room or space by paying attention to qualities and characteristics of the sounds. Follow the beginning of one sound to its end before moving on to the next or rest in listening to one sound.

When your mind or attention wanders (which it is expected to do), bring the focus back again to listening to sounds. Noticing that your attention has wandered and returning to listening to sound is mindfulness—this is the practice!

You may notice that you feel restful and calm after this exercise. This settling of a busy, stressful, anxious mind is a result you can cultivate, especially with a consistent practice.

A basic breath exercise helps to focus your attention with an easy, friendly attitude toward any distractions and stories in your head and returns your attention to begin again, connecting to the present moment.

If you are uncomfortable with the breath, other senses can be substituted such as listening to sounds as explored previously. Here are the steps:

Find a comfortable position. Check in and soften any tension points for you. Perhaps, your jaw is tight or neck or hands, and so on. Any posture can be used to initiate mindfulness in this way whether seated or lying down or standing.

You can close your eyes or keep them open, not looking around the space but softly gazing on something in front of you. At any time, you may shift your position or close or open your eyes. See what works for you.

Begin noticing the natural inhalations and exhalations of your breath. We do not force or manipulate the breath, merely notice and observe. Where do you feel the breath mostly in the body: at the nose, mouth, chest, or abdomen? Get curious about the qualities and characteristics of the breath in the body. Do you feel warmth or coolness or tingling?

When your mind or attention wanders (which it is expected to do), redirect your focus again to the breath and follow its natural inhalations and exhalations without creating or following any other stories in your head. Of course, thoughts and emotions will come and go but for the purpose of this ‘bicep curl for the brain’—allow these thoughts and emotions to come and go during this mindfulness workout. We do not judge or become annoyed by whatever thoughts or emotions do come and go, we practice a kind attitude toward them, and begin again.

Another mindfulness exercise provides a moment to ground yourself within your teaching space and simply rest in the body. For this exercise, you may notice the sensations of your feet on the ground, your body seated in your chair, and the sensations you may feel in your hands. You may note what you feel by softly, in your mind, saying: tingling, warmth, coolness, and so on. Bringing attention to the physical grounding of your body within your teaching space is another way to acknowledge your ‘here and now’ before the students arrive. All these

exercises and tools may help you develop emotional regulation, and a sense of calm and stillness that may diminish ‘stage fright’ or nervousness.

“The Readiness is All”

When we inevitably take a wrong turn during our teaching moments, another useful tool and technique that the actor turns to is improvisation. You will again and again have to pull yourself from whatever happens unexpectedly to the present moment of teaching (a technology glitch or onscreen typo, etc.). Each time you improvise how to return to the task at hand, you will gain the confidence to be ok with improvising your way out of the unknown into a connection to your student audience.

A little warning, what you may have said to one class in a humorous way to come back from an ‘oops’ may not work in another class. Humor is never the direct intention; often, humor is the organic result of the motivation and actions of you meeting the situation and the moment. This happens all the time with the best of actors in a live theatre performance. A laugh during one performance may never appear again! Timing the laugh, setting up the laugh is an art and skill that you will achieve with improvisational moments that occur during each class. Humor is a subtle practice, personalized, personable, and reasonable.

Indeed, “the readiness is all” are appropriate words by Hamlet and although he did not experience his desired outcome fully, we can change course and teach with new insights. You can use these acting tools and mindfulness exercises to support your teaching methods and your sense of presence and humor. You can be open, vulnerable, curious, kind, caring, and authentic with the choices of humor you use as an instruction librarian.

Using humor connects your humanity to your students. Isn’t that what Shakespeare was motivated to do with *Hamlet*? And no matter the

challenges we face personally or professionally, inside or outside the classroom, we can adapt, adopt, enjoy the process of preparation and the joy of educating our students. Now take your bow, you deserve it!

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