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Humor and higher education are infrequently mentioned in the same conversation, but much empirical evidence supports the contention that the use of humor is related to positive student perceptions of the instructor and learning environment (Banas et al., 2011; Garner, 2006; James, 2004; Suzuki & Heath, 2014). The literature certainly establishes a foundation to consider humor as a critical element of any instructor's online teaching arsenal and such an inclusion may be particularly pertinent at this time, given the undeniable shift in higher education dynamics as more institutions, both by choice and circumstance, witness unprecedented growth in their web-based programs. Strategies to assist instructors in giving their online courses a personality makeover are featured.

The value of humor within higher education is not necessarily an immediate connection that educators tend to make. While the pedagogical potential of humor is certainly not a new concept, with early literature from the 1970s referring to college teaching as the "highest form of show biz" and calling for instructors to develop a deep sense of humor (Miller, 1979, p. 10), the characterization of an urbane professor as a performer and motivator is not shared universally across higher education. However, Segrist and Hupp (2015) summarized 41 years of empirical research on humor in the classroom and found an increase in learning, self-motivation, class participation, test performance, and divergent thinking. Laughter can stimulate communication and act as a conversation starter, tension-breaker, or therapeutic intervention (Provine, 2000). According to Paterson (2019), the use of humor gets students' attention because it typically involves the unexpected, which alerts the attentional center of the brain and, in turn, increases the likelihood of information recall. In this article, I will cover the background of humor in education, present an overview of the concept, and then consider next steps for educators.

Background

The COVID 19 pandemic and subsequent transition to online and asynchronous instruction has had a profound effect upon faculty members who often attempt to teach online courses with traditional teaching styles and mindsets. They may lack a "teaching presence" that extends beyond the managerial and technical aspects of their interactions with students. However, the incorporation of humor enhances an instructor's ability to be socially present, to project a personality through cyberspace, and to demonstrate a sense of accessibility. It has been said that ''A strict teacher can be successful but a humorous teacher can be more successful" (Vijay, 2014, 260-61). Interestingly, Buskist et al. (2002) compared the student and professor ratings given to certain teacher attributes and discovered that 49% of students considered happy, positive, and humorous qualities and behaviors to be highly regarded for master teachers while only 7% of professors did so.

To that end, a 2021 survey conducted at Northern Kentucky University (Information Technology Advisory Committee, 2021) revealed 60% of students expressed either disagreement or neutrality toward the notion that they felt connected to their instructors during the past year of online learning. As a member of several key committees within my College charged with exploring academic innovations, student retention, and distance learning quality assurance, it has been vital to underscore that our vision rests with faculty who are passionate about student-centered learning. Instructors often do not enjoy or derive the greatest reward from their online courses because of low confidence, their inattention to the affective aspects of online teaching, and/or a perceived "flat" reaction from students. The online experience relies on the interaction of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 1999). Both cognitive and social presence are closely tied to and supported by teaching presence, which can be described as the instructors' ability to project themselves in online courses. When considering the use of humor as a "humanizing" strategy for asynchronous, synchronous, or even Zoom encounters, it is important to begin with the understanding that not all types of humor fit all types of professors...but there is *something* for everyone.

When contemplating how to embed humor into the online classroom, it is helpful to first recognize the level of skepticism of individual faculty members regarding the potential of web-based education in general. Instructors who embrace the possibilities, or the inevitability, of an online medium are more likely to use available technological tools to develop closer relationships with

students that, in many instances, will involve humorous materials, presentations, and communications, even if the tools or the approach were not the instructor's natural preference. Conversely, professors who are more dubious about non-traditional delivery may be less prone to contemplate a seemingly high-risk venture like humor and simply be content 'posting' the same types of material they prepare for face-to-face instruction and consider it sufficient for online teaching. For some educators, comedy can feel like it breaks down classroom hierarchies too much, whereas, for others, it serves only to reinforce them (Hennefeld, Berke, & Rennett, 2019).

Humor in Action

"Humor" as a teaching strategy can be divided into categories of theory, and some of the theories are better suited for the academic environment than others. Incongruity theory suggests that people laugh at something that surprises them or violates an accepted pattern of thinking. Relief theory is when laughter serves to relieve stress, anxiety, or nervousness. These two theories can be extremely beneficial in the higher education setting. Humor is not without its boundaries, however. For example, the superiority theory describes humor as laughing at someone or making fun of someone's flaws or misfortunes. Professors should not employ humor that pokes fun at individual students, especially any remarks related to physical appearance, disability, mannerisms, or cultural identification. It is likewise best to avoid puns and jokes related to customs, family relationships, religion, or racial issues. Humor should not be sarcastic in nature or that which attempts to deliver a mocking comment disguised as a "joke." Some college students may take the meaning of words literally and have difficulty interpreting a "good-natured kidding" from a "hurtful put-down." Remember that humor is a universal phenomenon but is also culturally tinted. Therefore, cultural differences within an online classroom should certainly not be overlooked because individual cultures have varying interpretations of specific humor items (Jiang et al., 2019). Given this context and background, I will share specific examples of the use humor in the online environment based upon my own experiences with both undergraduate and graduate students at Northern Kentucky University, a regional institution with over 16,000 students, 2000 faculty and staff, and over 70 majors. I personally teach foundational courses in Education such as *Introduction to Education and Introduction to Research Methods*, regularly interacting with 100+ students online per semester.

Since humor has been described as a communicative attitude for teachers (Chiasson, 2002) that is applicable to all disciplines or content areas, any instructor can begin to engender this "attitude" during the first days of class by introducing oneself with a Top Ten list like "Top Ten Funniest Things about Your New Sociology Professor" and encouraging the students to create their own lists to share. Classroom expectations can be presented in a similar fashion: "Top Ten Behaviors that Drive Your Professor Cuckoo." If video is utilized, pretending to be tormented as the list is delivered will get one's points across while maintaining an air of playfulness and affability. Adding some well-chosen dashes of humor to the "welcome" email or first module introduction can go a long way toward alleviating apprehension and creating a warm environment, especially for classes that many students "dread" (which, depending on the individual student, can be just about any course in the catalog). Presenting a list like "Five Ways to Pass My Scary Class" lets the students know that one is trying to de-fang the reputation of the course by providing a little friendly assurance.

As an online professor undertakes a plan for the inclusion of humor, perhaps the most effective is content-related humor, which is humor that helps to illustrate and reinforce a conceptual point being made within the topic or materials. Although the humorous contributions alone are rarely sufficient to impart the sole point one is striving to make, they can be an efficient way of capturing the attention of students and personalizing otherwise impersonal content. For example, showing a parody of *Citizen Kane* on *The Simpsons* can be an excellent way to highlight noteworthy aspects of the original film and genre.

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 the screen. For this reason, visual humor is especially effective in online courses. Cartoons, illustrations, avatars, and photographs can easily be integrated throughout the course. Faculty members should begin to amass a collection of humorous materials like jokes, quotations, comic strips, music, pop culture references (be sure to avoid outdated icons that may not be familiar to younger students), and memes (captioned photos that are intended to be funny). Even the sacred syllabus with all of its institutional regulatory language can lend itself to some clever humor with tongue-in-cheek class prerequisites and amusing quotes. Harnish and Bridges (2010) found that a syllabus written in a friendly, rather than unfriendly, tone evoked perceptions of the instructor being more pleasant, more approachable, and more motivated to teach the course. Humor plays a large role in sending that message.

Creating videos for online classes will allow students to see one's body language and facial expressions that are so critical to nonverbal communication. Well-chosen stories and anecdotes can reduce the inherent inequity of the status and power relationship with the students (Korobkin, 1988). When instructors move past the awkwardness associated with seeing their screen image, hearing their voice, or amusingly expressing themselves and their materials, they begin to realize they are not bound to limited modalities and can successfully project their persona into the course or perhaps create a new one. For example, if a professor's content lends itself to oral readings of any kind, one can perk up an otherwise tedious rambling with "character voices." This role-play will be an instant hit and induce even the most reluctant listeners to give undivided attention to a poem, a passage, or even a dry biographical sketch of a famous philosopher. Imagine the possibilities of reading a canto from *Don Juan* while pretending to be Lord Byron with a full 19th Century accent (and garb if one is particularly ambitious).

Another potential landing spot for humor can come in the form of humorous interjections within legitimate test items, such as adding humor as distractors in questions or adding entirely humorous questions as extra credit. There is psychological and physiological research evidence that such humor reduces test anxiety, tension, and stress (Berk, 2000; Repass, 2017). Some instructors put humor in the feedback provided with the test questions. 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. All of these approaches lessen the perceived test anxiety of the online student. Instructors who are not comfortable with mixing business and pleasure in their assessments might consider providing an example of a question in the online test that demonstrates how the process works. A humorous item that is not counted as part of the student's score can be presented and ultimately serve to set a tone for the "real" exam to follow.

Beyond the use of witty test items, there are other openings for humor within assessment design. I refer to any quiz as a "quizeroo" and a larger exam as a "big quizeroo" because each sounds much less intimidating. Whenever I create a quiz or test, I seek ways to incorporate student names and an entertaining context into the questions. Amusing instructions also work well, such as "You may work with a partner on this quiz as long as that partner is not named Google." Review games and simulations have great potential as well.

A Plan for Laughter and Learning

A proactive strategy that could prove very useful within my own College, as well as other interested institutions that are seeking to incorporate humor without sacrificing credibility and rigor, is the creation of mini professional development "academies" on the use of humor, particularly in web-based and blended courses. These trainings, initiated by humor-loving instructors, could cover overall course design and delivery. Ramirez (2013) suggested informal brown-bag sessions on the role of humor, understanding one's humor style, and humor-based activities. It would be helpful if instructors were given an opportunity to pilot their newly developed humor using fellow professors as students. Instructors can receive feedback on how the humor was perceived in the online format. I would encourage faculty to develop their courses in collaboration with their instructional designers to better incorporate innovative hands-on simulations, animations, and educational gaming that integrate humor and other better methods of engaging students through collaborative learning. Ideally, courses that demonstrate effective uses of humor in online teaching can be shared among faculty. Berk (2003) pointed out that one reason why higher education instructors are reluctant to use humor is because humor is not part of any formal curriculum, and, therefore, professors have not received any training in its use. Targeted professional development on humor as a pedagogical tool would address this deficit and open up new possibilities to instructors who are curious but unconvinced or simply unsure about how to proceed.

Considerations

It is imperative that instructors recognize the need to develop an "emotive" self for the online medium, especially if one wants to encourage students to take additional classes or consider a possible major in one's discipline of study. An online professor with humor will bring a more personable, less rigid presence to a web-based environment that may otherwise feel sterile and automated. Busler et al. (2017) revealed that lacking a sense of humor is a quality that students perceive to be reflective of poor teaching. Take a chance. Don't be afraid to look or sound silly. Break out of your routine and as you launch an online course in any content area, be sure to give 'em something to smile about!

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