Implications of using humor in the classroom

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Abstract

Used in literature, medicine and psychology, but also in leadership, humor has a special role in the classroom being considered an effective and appreciated tool for teaching. Studies on this issue (Herbert P., Cornett, C. etc.) indicate the importance of using humor in the process of capturing and maintaining students’ attention, in creating a positive relationship between teachers and students, in reducing stress and tension in the classroom, facilitating learning and supporting a good retention, developing creativity and streamlining teaching in general.

The present study addresses the issue of using humor in the classroom, outlining an analysis of the ethical and unethical implications of using humor in the educational act. The conclusions demonstrate the need to pay a greater attention to training teachers in the ethical spirit to appeal to the humanizing strategies of teaching in general, using humor artfully at lessons being one of the most representative ones.

Keywords: humor, sense of humor, ethical and unethical in the use of humor, strategies of initial / continuing teachers’ training.

Introduction

Used in literature, medicine and psychology, but also in leadership, advertising or media, humor has a special role in the classroom being considered an effective and appreciated tool for teaching. Studies on this issue (Herbert P., Cornett, C. etc.) indicate the importance of using humor in the process of capturing and maintaining students’

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attention, in creating a positive relationship between teachers and students, in reducing stress and tension in the classroom, facilitating learning and supporting a good retention, developing creativity and streamlining teaching in general.

1. The use of humor in the classroom

1.1 Resonances of using humor in relationships with students

The sense of humor is appreciated as one of the essential qualities of the teacher— he/she transmits it to the student (by calling to humor), trust, comfort, relaxation, benevolence but a positive view on life.

Essential in interpersonal relationships, able to make connections and create a warm atmosphere, with a fantastic power to transmit energy to the learner (if used in a positive sense), humor should be part of the training of trainers concerns - both of those who have a stronger orientation toward humor, and especially of others; those in the first category are necessary parts to use humor in ethical limits, others - to first identify the resonances of humor in the work with students and then to practice how to use it correctly / ethically in teaching.

The humor indicates the teacher’s ability to express intelligent and spiritual expression, being an effective way to capture attention first by calling to emotion. If we call to the positive emotion, as is natural in an activity with students, the implications can be distinguished: the association with positive experiences supports learning, motivation for this activity and thus increases learning power, as well as academic achievement.

Studies conducted on the topic under discussion (Duffy & Jones, 1995, for example) indicate other benefits of using humor in the classroom - retrieving information from previous lessons, retaining information more easily, humor being a smart way to stimulate children for knowledge, as a catalyst between students and teacher and an energizing of the intellect.

Usually, the teacher calls to jokes, funny analogies, puns, allusions, comic or irony, and also teasing, even sarcasm or ridicule. Unusual or unconventional associations, role-plays, gender stereotypes, appeal to fantasy / imagination etc. are also ways of building humor in the classroom. Funny questions addressed even in the oral examinations or tests may be used by the teacher to relax and alleviate the atmosphere.

It is important for the humor not to have humiliating, derogatory, caustic shades, not to affect in any way those involved.

Relevant humor has so many cognitive and psychological benefits of which we summarize: maintains attention and arouses curiosity of pupils / students, requests thinking, attention and develops critical thinking (Herbert, P.1991), develops the skill of nuanced communication, replaces tension and anxiety during classes with a relaxed atmosphere and promotes a positive environment, thus resulting a fun learning process, eliminates boredom, routine, and encourages students to get out of patterns and try new approaches, has a role in socialization and strengthening the group of students. We must not forget the therapeutic functions of humor - "it acting as a valve in the classroom" (Herbert, P.1991).

Humor can create pleasant experiences to students if the teacher knows to use a quality humor.

1.2 Some theories about humor

Over time, the problem of humor caught the attention of many thinkers, outlining a series of ideas, sometimes contrasting. In Antiquity, for instance, Plato despised humor mostly because it was directed against others with malice and contempt. In turn, Hobbes believed that laughter takes offensive forms and usually occurs when the competitive spirit is manifested between people, some showing their superiority over others.

The two thinkers analyze humor and scale it according to its moral dimensions, concluding that humor can provide moral issues.

Specialty literature synthesizes three humor theories: the superiority theory (Gruner) the incongruity theory (Koestler, Suls) –and the aggressiveness theory from psychoanalytic perspective proposed by Freud.

The superiority theory synthesizes the idea that the pleasure to call to humor comes from the feeling of superiority of the one who laughs. The incongruity theory outlines the idea of a discrepancy between what is
expected and what is received – the contrast (arisen, for example, in a joke) evokes laughter. *Freud’s theory* describes a psychoanalytic perspective of humor, believing that humor appears as a disguised form of aggressiveness.

Authors Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams in their *work Inside Jokes: using humor to reverse-engineer the mind* (2011, Massachusetts Institute of Technology) - remember: biological theories, play theories, superiority theories, release theories, incongruity and incongruity-resolution theories, surprise theories and Bergson's mechanical theories.

Starting from these theories underlying the understanding of humor with its many facets, teachers must realize that humor can be used both positively and negatively in the classroom, the line is very easily passed and it is important the way of making the choices.

2. **How innocent is humor?**

2.1 **Unethical aspects of using humor in working with students**

At questions as *How innocent is humor? or How moral is humor?* specialty literature (Black, Forro, 1999) points out that some forms of humor may have a number of negative influences and in these situations humor may offend, can inhibit communication because of different styles to make jokes (which some do not understand), can create tensions, can trigger even fear, stress and depression.

There are many variations of humor, among them being irony, sarcasm or ridicule that represent those forms of humor that people call to with relative ease, considering them frequently innocent and clever forms to joke. Most times, though, these forms of humor violate ethical boundaries and become risky, offensive, derogatory. Unfortunately, negative facets of humor are common also in the classroom, being used by teachers (consciously or not) and take the form of that subtle and painful violence affecting self image, confidence, that trigger and maintain pupils'/students' frustration. These forms of humor are used to dominate, bully / hurt or manipulate students. In school, "misuse of humor creates a hostile learning environment that stifles rapidly communication and self-esteem." (Loomans, Kolberg, 1993).

So, humor is not always funny, especially when it is abusively used and it passes the ethical boundaries.

2.2.1 **Hostile, offensive humor, potentially conflictual**

Different forms of humor such as irony or sarcasm may become variations of hostile, offensive, potentially conflictual humor. Both irony and sarcasm is met in the classroom also as a sanction directed towards the students. Both have common elements: can arouse laughter (less among the victims). If irony is not always malicious, sarcasm is associated with a particular harassment of the person and aims to cause pain.

Usually irony calls to humorous means to convey the opposite senses of the communicated, drawing the contrast between expectations and what happens in reality. This difference between appearance and the insinuated meanings makes it hard to establish rules for the construction and identification of irony. Irony depends on the context, the power of transmission of the message and the receiver’s ability to interpret. We know the meaning of the Socratic irony and self-irony and their role in discovery and knowledge.

It is stated that irony tries to remove faults (in school – students’ faults); unfortunately, we often encounter the senseless, cheap irony that manifests as the desire to dominate and exercise superiority; aimed for students in its less nice form, often loaded by the teacher’s arrogance and sense of power, irony triggers shame that causes soul suffering, especially among sensitive students, students in their teens, but also adult students or learners. Understood as dry humor, sarcasm takes the form of a bitter (bitter irony) sharp, offending remark to the victim - in this case the victim is the pupil or the student, usually.

Sarcasm expresses in a malicious and arrogant way disrespect, contempt and focuses on the others’ faults and weaknesses. Putting on his note of humor, "it can reach up to rudeness that is seen as lack of civility *(fr.incivilité) and as a form of violence that results from lack of courtesy, non-recognition or violating elementary rules of social life, lack of courtesy, unladylike expression (...) *" (Cocorada, 2008)
Sarcasm strengthens, thus, the sense of power of the aggressor and the feeling of lack of respect of the victims.

Irony, sarcasm, ridicule (by calling the nicknames given to students, for example), humiliating remarks or insults dissimulated in fun, can be forms of inappropriate humor that intimidates, assaults, causes dramatic tension among pupils / students. 

The conclusion is that in school there are elements of indirect, psychological violence supported by unethical use of humor.

In its harshest forms, humor is manifested through inhumanity, also used in excess, triggers physical and emotional stress among students, fitting into the category of didactic-geniuses and / or abusive behaviours of teachers leading to the so-called moral harassment. If didactic-genius is defined as a "pathological state of anxiety and depression encountered in some students as a result of the didactic mistakes of educators" (DEX), moral harassment involves destabilization, offense, results in the victim blame, loss of confidence, effacement of his/her image. (...) If didactic-geniuses are most often the result of the teachers’ ignorance, moral harassment happens by intentional and insincere actions.

In school we can identify them as forms of violence. We recall here the symbolic violence (suggested by French sociologist P. Bourdieu) that "after Godett (2006) (taken over from E. Cocorada, 2008) is necessary when the student or the teacher is not regarded with respect, when the natural needs of participants in an activity are not recognized and respected, when there are no connections between individuals, but a generalized indifference”. Unethical humor belongs to such a category of violence.

The experimental pseudo-violence can also comprise some negative forms of humor. Being a form of aggression "that tests the limits, norms, rules by challenge, that not results from destructive intentions, but it is the result of doing what is forbidden" (idem), this type of violence is seen, for example, in the case of excellent students who adopt behaviors at the line of politeness and lack of common sense - who use acid, inappropriate, provocative, even offensive jokes or ironies, in order to experience the violation of school rules and regulations.

In this context, the unethical dimensions of humor, represent either the right to action, or the right to defense, constitute health risk for those involved - for students and teachers alike; we support this idea by appealing to the statement of the authors of the paper Defense mechanisms - Jacquet Marie-Madeleine and Claude Lhote (2002) which points out that "irony and self-irony are the negative facets of humor used to avoid painful or awkward feelings."

It is important for the teachers to be trained to prevent these forms of school violence and to adopt a desirable, balanced behavior. A detailed information on the dangers and negative effects of unethical use of humor in the classroom, we believe, would help in creating a more complete and nuanced picture of what an educational activity taken in accordance with the ethical standards of the teaching profession means.

2.2.2 About humor, persuasion and how to influence with integrity

Both the teacher's ability to persuade as well as the sense of humor proved to be especially valuable in working with students. Understood as "the process of changing opinions, attitudes or behavior of some people aware that this change is expected by exposure to the messages with this purpose" (Chelcea, 2004), persuasion may call to elements of humor. If masterfully wields the elements of humor, the teacher will obtain an increase of trust and sympathy from his students and thus a consistent support in persuasion.

Talking about education in general, we consider the positive dimensions of students’ transformations, changes of behavior, attitude that occur after persuasive actions. (Eși, 2004) But often, the tools of persuasion are misused by the teacher, and their action turns into manipulation.

The teacher’s aim is one worthy to the extent that we are dealing with a pedagogical purpose, which is built according to the rules of the ethics of teaching. But there are cases when the appeal to humor lacks the required moral integrity. "Sometimes teachers use humor to get the students’ confidence so that later to intervene to influence them more easily. Or, it is known, trust is essential in creating a favorable climate for building good relationships. Specialists say that to gain confidence, one who is interested in gaining the trust of others can reveal some less pleasant aspects, or personal small flaws. Here's how humor, as self-irony or fun self-esteem can influence students’ attitude, creating a pleasant, relaxed and optimistic, even intimate atmosphere that can be sometimes used
negatively, for example, in order to obtain students’ conformism. (Jeder, 2013, 2014)
So if there is a lack of professional conscience, the teacher first gains the students’ trust, appealing to humor, and then seeks to manipulate them more easily. (Turtle, 2009)
But genuine education is defined also by moral integrity; therefore even from the initial training of educators / teachers a particular concern for knowledge and internalization of these landmarks is needed.

3. Education and training for and through humor

The school and its teachers must prepare the students to face real life (Nagy, 2013). And in our opinion, the appeal to the sense of humor, in many situations, can be an effective way to meet the challenges of life. In this context, the intervention must be done in two ways:
- on the one hand the training of teachers should pay attention to the subject of initiation in using humor in teaching, of course respecting the rules and rigors of ethics of education,
- and on the other hand, to encourage the pupils / students’ sense of humor, to cultivate quality, intelligent and meaningful humor.

Regarding the first sense, the literature (Herbert 1991, Egan 2007) points out a number of issues that teachers must take into consideration in teaching: humor is used in an appropriate way, in ethical limits; it must be relevant and connected with the theme / content of the activity (it was proved that irrelevant humor is effective in working with preschoolers, but it subsides with advancing in age); humor must be appropriate to age peculiarities, thus rendered accessible and adapted to be understood and to have the desired impact; using humor in class shouldn’t affect pupils / students, should not create situations that make one feel awkward or ridiculous (should not laugh at the name of students, physical defects, no discriminatory-sexist, racist or others remarks).

Humor is a binder in creating the emotional relationships between students and teachers, and we believe that this aspect should be given the due importance in the initial and continuous training of teachers.

In our opinion, the formation and use of humor practicing skills in working with students, can be used in the training, sessions for creating humorous situations; they can focus on building humorous analogies in the contents to teach, to create explanations that call to humorous metaphors, thinking of emphasis and associations that shock, and amuse at the same time, finding puns or building anecdotal stories etc. All of them have a strong emotional charge and a much more force to transmit than in classical teaching methods. Equally suitable would be the initiation in some acting techniques - that focus on training gestural expressiveness, bodily expressiveness, in the end, the expressiveness of all types of communication.

These are just a few examples in which a teacher can be formed for the essential things that helps him in teaching, expressed in the following exhortation: "Never be boring. Always be clear and try to be funny from time to time. Say to yourself that you address people who expect three things from you: to learn something new, something exciting and fun details." (Ferréol, Flageul, 1998)

On the other hand, it is indicated for students to be taught to feel and taste the warm, lucid, inspiring humor, and not the opponent that causes suffering. Moreover, children (and also adults) find funny the jokes that are based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of a word (Egan, 2007) and this way they learn to use language with more skill and develop their attachment to school and study.

Of course, the teacher must adapt humor to the students’ age, the educational context and the content to study, to train students for humor means forming the free spirit, making them think outside the patterns, encourage them to try with more courageous new things, perceived from different points of view, not to standardize them but to develop their creativity.

Humor has the fundamental effect of humanizing; on the one hand, humanization of teaching (which we often find thwarted and patterned, without inspiration) and, through it, humanizing the educational actors who respond with admiration to this fruitful challenge.
Conclusions

Developing the sense of humor and nurturing a quality humor both among students and teachers, are ways in which school would get more value, in the sense that it would provide the necessary tools to create and maintain wellness, to stimulate thought, imagination, positive emotions etc. as goals or targets of an authentic education.

The idea for the need to pay greater attention to training of teachers in the spirit of ethics of appeal to humanizing strategies of teaching in general, using artfully humor in teaching is one of the most representative.

It should focus on exploring the moral limits of humor in the classroom, of possible blockages and slip hazards, but also to build and to propose some strategies of teacher training (best practices) on the one hand, in order to initiate them into the art of using humor in teaching, and on the other hand, to form / foster students' sense of humor essential for a meaningful and balanced life.

Pedagogy, psychology, communication, methodology or acting courses can sustain this formative intercession to practice the ability to use humor in the activity with students and would sustain therefore a more touches, expressive and probably more valuable educational act.

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