

TEACHERS' REPORT OF HOW THEY USED HUMOR WITH STUDENTS PERCEIVED USE OF SUCH HUMOR

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This paper is a result of a comparison of two surveys concerning the use of humor in the classroom. One questionnaire was mailed to 365 university teachers in fourteen Arkansas universities and had a 35 percent response rate. The second questionnaire polled over two hundred juniors/senior university students who had attended 65 different institutions and had a 100 percent response rate. The professors and students had similar opinions on the use of humor to relieve stress, to gain attention, and to create a healthy learning environment; over 80 percent of both groups agreed that these uses of humor were appropriate. In addition, both groups did not believe humor should be used to embarrass students, to intimidate students, or to retaliate against students; all three items received a minimum of 70 percent disapproval by both groups. The item with greatest variance between the two groups concerned the use of humor to handle an unpleasant situation with 59 percent of students thinking this was an appropriate use of humor compared to only 15 percent of faculty. In addition, there was significant variation in how teachers report using humor to motivate, to provoke thinking, and to reinforce knowledge with how students perceive humor has been used for these purposes.

Introduction and Statement of Problem

A study was conducted of 365 teachers in twelve public and private universities in Arkansas to determine the teachers' use of humor in the classroom; a 35 percent response rate was received. The results of this research was reported in the spring of 2000. The researcher thought it would be beneficial and interesting to conduct a second research of students to determine how students perceived humor had been used. Over two hundred students were polled in 1999-2000 in classes. The 206 students surveyed had attended 65 different colleges. The following research will compare the responses of the students recently polled with that of the faculty surveyed in

a previous study to determine how the two groups concur or differ on the effective use of humor in the classroom.

Review of Literature

One very complete research effort concerning the use of humor in the classroom was compiled by Claudia Corvett through a grant from the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation. Corvett's book included four pages of references of research concerning humor in teaching. However, nearly all were concerned with humor used in kindergarten, elementary, junior high, high school, with the gifted, the handicapped, or some group of learners other than university level students (Corvett,

1986).

In addition, a more current book, *Professors are from Mars; Students are from Snickers*, also concluded that little is available on humor use at the collegiate level (Berk, 1998).

Some of the results of other research using humor include Korobkin's study which revealed that humor is more effectively used in presenting lecture material or other instructional presentations and is not effectively used in the assessment area. He found that humorous test questions used to decrease anxiety may not be well received by the college age or adult students (Korobkin, 1989).

Another significant finding was that although the humorous incident may appear to be short-lived, it has far-reaching consequences. There was found to be a statistically significant, positive effect on retaining content after humorous presentation of the information (Korobkin, 1989).

Wanzer and Frymier (1999) found that teachers with a high humor orientation had increased perceptions of learning taking place by students. Their study further revealed that high humor orientation students reported learning more with a high humor oriented teacher.

Haigh (1999) suggests the judicious use of humor can help teachers gain respect and classroom rapport. Mallard found humor to be "a powerful strategy for diffusing tense situations," (Mallard, 1999). Further, Kher and others (1999) suggest the use of humor in "dread courses" in college. They identify "dread courses" as those students avoid because of perceived difficulty, a previous negative experience, or the students' lack of confidence.

Ziv studied the effects of using humor in the classroom and increased creativity in thinking. Ziv stated that using humor can contribute to the expressions of more divergent thinking (Ziv, 1976).

In addition, the medical publications contain numerous references to healthy benefits of humor. Laughter has been found to produce effects on blood pressure, respiration and the suppression of stress-related hormones (Goodman, 1989). Also, using humor as part of teaching methodology was found to initiate the learner's interest (Dodge & Rossett, 1982).

Some caution on the use of humor in the classroom was expressed by Kubhrik who stated:

Using humor wisely is encouraged to facilitate classroom learning processes without endangering the teacher's professional credibility. Of course, there are limits to determining what is funny and what isn't, and the mere inclusion of classroom humor does not automatically guarantee learning will take place, it must not exceed appropriate boundaries (Kuhrik, 1997).

Certain cultures may not recognize humor as socially acceptable; and, also, at various times in a person's life humorous situations may not be appreciated. Such situations need to be handled individually. Korobkin suggested five uses of humor in instruction which included (1) promotion of a humanistic, laughter-filled learning environment (2) cultivation of group humor and group identification, (3) promotion of self-discovery and risk tak-

ing (4) development of retention cues, and (5) release of anxiety and stress (Korobkin, 1989).

Purpose, Scope, and Limitation of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of university professors and university students concerning the use of humor in the classroom. To poll the faculty, a questionnaire was developed with the assistance of professors at Arkansas universities and with nine honor professors currently teaching at Southern Arkansas University.

From the screening sample group's input the questionnaire was refined and the

positive and negative items determined. The statements remaining after purification of the original list were randomly ordered on the questionnaire so as to mix positive and negative items.

The questionnaire was mailed to faculty in public and private universities in Arkansas; they were mailed in equal numbers to the faculty in the four areas of: education, business, science and math, and liberal and performing arts. Three hundred and sixty five questionnaires were mailed and 128 responses were received. This represented a 35 percent response rate.

The universities included in the survey and number of questionnaires mailed are included in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Universities Participating in Survey

University	Questionnaires Mailed
Henderson State University	40
Hendrix College	40
John Brown University	15
Lyon College	15
University of Arkansas at Fayetteville	60
University of Arkansas at Little Rock	40
University of Arkansas at Monticello	35
University of Central Arkansas	40
Ouachita Baptist University	25
Southern Arkansas University	47
Williams Baptist College	8

To poll the students the same thirteen-part questionnaire utilized to poll the faculty was used. In addition, the students were asked to give one example of how a teacher used humor effectively. The students were also asked to list all college

attended. Although the 206 students responding to the survey were from one institution, they had attended 65 additional universities. The list of universities represented in the study are listed in Table 2 below:

Table 2
Universities Attended By Student Respondents

Angelina College	Louisiana Tech University
Aquinas College	Mississippi County Community College
Ark Tech University	Northeast Louisiana University
Arkansas State University	Northwest Arkansas Community College
Bahamas Baptist Community College	Northwestern State University
Bossier Parish Community College	Northwood University
Cameron University	Orange College
Cedar Valley Community College	Ouachita Baptist College
Central Baptist University	Paris Junior College
College of the Bahamas	Pensacola Junior College
Columbia State University	Phillips University
Copioh Lincoln Community College	Seneca College
Cossatot Technical College	South Arkansas Community College
East Texas State University	Southern Arkansas University
Eastern Kentucky University	Stephen F. Austin State University
Eastern Oklahoma State University	Texarkana College
Fullterton College	Texas A&M
Garland County Community College	Tulsa Community College
Harding University	UACC -- Hope
Henderson State University	University of Arkansas
Kellogg Community College	University of Central Arkansas
Kilgore Junior College	University of Florida
Louisiana State University	University of Kentucky
Louisiana State University -- Shreveport	University of Ozarks
Pierce University	Virginia State University
Red River Vocational Technical College	Waldorf College
Rich Mountain Community College	Walsh University
Saddleback College	Washington State University
San Jacinto Junior College	Westark Community College
SAU Tech	Wiley College

Results of the Study of Faculty

Sixty percent of the faculty respondents were male; forty percent female. Twenty-one percent of respondents had less than ten years of teaching experience while 31 percent fell into the two categories of 11-20

years experience and 31 percent into the 21-30 years of experience. Seventeen percent had over 31 years of teaching experience.

Additional elements of the profile of the respondents to the survey regarding teaching areas and ages follows.

Teaching Area	Age		The results of the 13-part questionnaire which determined how Arkansas college teachers use humor in the classroom to accomplish various objectives is depicted in Table 3 with an analysis to follow.
Business			
30%	20-25	9%	
Math & Science			
31%	36-50	44%	
Education			
14%	51-64	43%	
Liberal & Performing Arts			
25%	65+	4%	

Table 3
How Teachers Use Humor

Teachers Use Humor To	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Relieve Stress	2%	0	2%	50%	46%
Motivate	3	2	12	46	37
Provoke Thinking	2	5	14	45	34
Gain Attention	2	0	2	36	60
Embarrass Students	58	25	9	6	2
Handle Unpleasant Situations	15	53	17	11	4
Reinforce Knowledge	2.4	6.4	14.4	46.4	30.4

Intimidate Students	62	24	5	7	2
Control Students	30	21	27	20	2
Create Healthy Learning Environment	1	0	6	52	41
Retaliate Against Students	63	26	4	6	1
Help Students Develop a Good Self-Image	4	7	33	39	17
Help Students Understand Other Cultures	10.5	10.5	35	32	12

Ninety-six percent of the responding teacher's agree/strongly agree that teachers should use humor to relieve stress and to gain attention. There is more consensus on these two ways to use humor in a positive way than any of the other items on the survey. In addition 93 percent agree/strongly agree humor could be used to create a healthy learning environment.

There was less consensus on use of humor to motivate, (83% agree/strongly agree) use of humor to provoke thinking (79% agree/strongly agree); and use of humor to reinforce knowledge (77% agree/strongly agree).

Over eighty percent of the responding teachers disagreed/strongly disagreed that humor should be used to retaliate against

students (89%), intimidate students (86%), or embarrass students (83%).

More differences emerged to the items relating to using humor to help students understand other cultures. Only 44 percent of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that cultural understanding was an appropriate use of humor, 21 percent disagreed/strongly disagreed that cultural understanding was an appropriate objective to attempt to accomplish through humor, and 35 percent had no opinion.

Likewise, only 56 percent of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that the use of humor to develop a healthy self-image was a proper use of classroom humor; 11 percent disagreed/strongly disagreed that it should be used for such a teaching objec-

tive; and 33 percent remained neutral on this item.

The widest variation occurred concerning the use of humor to control students with 51 percent disagreeing/strongly disagreeing on control being an appropriate use of humor. However, 47 percent agreed/strongly agreed that humor should be used to control students. Further, 68 percent disagreed/strongly disagreed with using humor to handle unpleasant situations.

Fifty percent of the teachers responding to the questionnaire answered the open-ended question where they were asked to give examples of how they used humor. Many of their answers were references to using themselves as the object of a joke or sarcasm. Furthermore the questionnaire or cover letter did not mention cartoons specifically; however, many teachers volunteered that this is one important way they insert humor into their classes. Although research seems to indicate that adult and college level students do not appreciate humor in relation to a test situation (Korobkin, 1989), several of the responding teachers believed it was a good stress reliever. They gave many examples of the use of humor in the assessment area. Also, many of the written responses reinforced an idea often expressed and that is that a good teacher is somewhat of an actor. Many of the uses of humor reflected an ability to "act" in the classroom. Although almost all of the uses of humor reported were positive, a few respondents reported negative examples of their attempts to employ humor in the classroom. It may be that the teachers who did not respond to the humor questionnaire might have had similar

experiences since the responses received were overwhelmingly positive.

Results of the Study of Students

Two hundred six students responded to the survey which contained the identical thirteen items included on the faculty questionnaire. These students had studied at a total of 65 different institutions and were at the junior or senior level in college.

The items on the 13-part questionnaire were identical to the items on the faculty questionnaire and asked students to base their answers on the college teachers who had taught them as to the teachers' ability to accomplish various objectives with humor. The results are depicted in Table 4 with an analysis to follow.

Eighty-five percent of the responding students have had teachers use humor to relieve stress and to gain attention. There is more consensus on these two ways students observe teachers using humor than any of the other items. In addition, eighty percent have observed teachers using humor to create a healthy learning environment.

There was less consensus on use of humor to motivate (65% agree/strongly agree); use of humor to handle unpleasant situations (59% agree/strongly agree); and use of humor to provoke thinking (56% agree/strongly agree).

Over seventy percent of students had not had teachers use humor to embarrass students (70 percent strongly disagree/disagree); intimidate students (72% strongly disagree/disagree); or retaliate against students (71% strongly disagree/disagree).

There was less consensus on the remaining items. Forty-seven percent neither agree nor disagree that humor had been used to help students develop a good self-

Table 4
How Students Perceive Humor Was Used By Teachers

According to Students, Teachers Use Humor To	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Relieve Stress	0%	6%	9%	68%	17%
Motivate	1	7	27	53	12
Provoke Thinking	1	12	31	37	19
Gain Attention	1	5	9	41	44
Embarrass Students	17.4	52.4	21	8	1
Handle Unpleasant Situations	3	9	29	53	6
Reinforce Knowledge	6	17	32	38	7
Intimidate Students	23	49	20	6	1
Control Students	13	39	32	13	3
Create Healthy Learning Environment	1	2	16	66	15
Retaliate Against Students	26	45	22	6	1
Help Students Develop a Good Self-Image	2	12	47	34	5
Help Students Understand Other Cultures	5	21	42	28	4

image, 42 percent to help students understand other cultures, 32 percent to control students, and 32 percent to reinforce knowledge.

One hundred fifty-two of the students responded to the open-ended question asking for an example of how a teacher had used humor effectively in a class. The examples students gave showed the consensus was that students saw effective use of humor as helping explain complicated or difficult material, motivating students, relieving stress, regaining attention, encouraging class participation, and helping students remember. Many students wrote about teachers who used humor to relieve stress in a test situation. Interestingly, no student resented the use of cartoons, a funny question, or a funny comment when distributing the test or any humor used in relation to testing. However, previous research had indicated students would resent the use of humor in a test situation (Korobkin, 1989).

Comparison of Professors' and Students' Responses

How students see teachers using humor in the classroom compared with how teach-

ers believe they are using humor is depicted in the tables below. There is much agreement on the items presented in Table 5.

In addition the students and professors agree on the negative areas as far as using humor in the classroom. Table 6 compares the two groups.

There is less agreement between the students and professors concerning using humor to motivate, provoke thinking, and reinforcing knowledge. See Table 7 below.

Although teachers rate using humor to motivate, to provoke thinking, and to reinforce knowledge as primary uses of humor, the students do not perceive it being used to the same extent with students' percentages ranging 18 to 32 percent lower on the three items.

The items both groups neither agreed/nor disagreed with concerned use of humor to help students understand other cultures (42% students/35% professors); and to help students develop a good self image (47% students/33% professors). It seems both groups do not necessarily see these two items as appropriate objectives for using humor. In addition, half of both groups believed strongly that to control

Table 5

	Students agree/strongly agree	Professors agree/strongly agree
Relieve Stress	85%	96%
Gain Attention	85%	96%
Create Healthy Learning Environment	80%	93%

students was not an appropriate use of humor.

The one item where there was greatest variation between the beliefs of students

and professors concerning humor use was in handling unpleasant situations with 59 percent of students agreeing/strongly agreeing that humor had been used versus

Table 6

	Students	Professors
Retaliate Against Students	71%	89%
Intimidate Students	72%	86%
Embarrass Students	70%	83%

Table 7

	Students agree/strongly agree	Professors agree/strongly agree
Motivate	65%	83%
Provoke Thinking	56%	79%
Reinforce Knowledge	45%	77%

only 15 percent of faculty reporting they use humor to handle unpleasant situation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Both faculty and students believe humor should be or had been used to relieve stress, gain attention, and create a healthy learning environment – well above 80 percent consensus by both groups. Likewise, both faculty and students do not believe that humor should be or had been used to embarrass students, intimidate students, or retaliate against students – 70 percent and above consensus by both groups. Over fifty percent of both groups do not believe that humor should be or had been used to control students.

The item of greatest variation between the faculty/student groups concerned the use of humor to handle unpleasant situations with 59 percent of students versus 15 percent of faculty reporting its use. Students seem to see humor as a good way to diffuse a difficult situation while faculty do not. Perhaps the faculty believe humor use might exacerbate a difficult situation so are fearful of inserting humor into the situation. With America's litigious society, one can see how faculty might perceive this item in a different way than a student. However, Millard (1999) would agree with the students and not the faculty on the use of humor to handle unpleasant situations.

In addition, a study large enough to

compare the difference in the way humor is used by specific disciplines would be appropriate. The review of the literature tended to support the idea that the medical profession primarily saw humor as a great reliever of stress.

Also, as the classroom continues to grow more global in composition, humor as perceived by different cultures would be an important area to study. One cannot assume that all cultures respond to humor in the same way. In fact, what might be a positive use of humor with one culture might be perceived negatively by a student from a different culture.

The topic of humor in the college classroom has only begun to be studied.

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