

Humor and Boundaries in the Classroom



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Learning Outcomes of This Workshop

Participants will leave the workshop able to:

- Explain the positive ways humor operates in the classroom.
- Recognize the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate humor.
- Identify cultural aspects of classroom humor.

What Do You Think?

What are the pros and cons of instructors using humor as a teaching tool?

Let's take a couple of minutes to write those down.



Humor in the Classroom

- Pros:
 - Ice-breaker
 - Creates a friendly environment
 - Reduces the anxiety and stress of students
 - Makes it easier for students to communicate, ask questions, and approach the TA
 - Promotes participation
 - Shy students will automatically feel part of the classroom

Humor in the Classroom

- Cons:
 - Could potentially break the boundaries of respect that you or the students are not comfortable with
 - Could offend someone
 - Too much of it could create a non-disciplined environment where teaching the material becomes hard

Humor Outside of Classroom

- Office hours: possibly fewer people, more one-on-one interaction, more sensitive use of humor.
- Non-academic interactions: do you tighten up your boundaries or do you loosen up?
 - Examples: school's cafeteria, seminar or conference not related to the course you TA for, or at a bar in downtown Merced!

Activity

- Respond to this sample student email in a humorous fashion.

Hey Dude. What's up? I'm that handsome kid that was sitting in the corner, with the red hat, remember me? Got a question for you. When is that paper about that thing we talked about in class due? Maaaaannnn I'm being lazy these days (lol), you mind if I copy the paper from someone else? You know, no cheating or anything, he's my cousin so that doesn't count. Besides, you're an all cool TA, I'm sure you won't tell. Take care!

Humor Over the Web

- Email (remember that the student is not seeing your facial expressions and gestures, and is not hearing your tone)
- Phone conversation
- Facebook/ Myspace (accepting all or some friend requests?)
- Skype



Types of Humor

- Textual (specially in social sciences)
- Pictorial: animations, cartoons (specially useful in powerpoint presentations)
- Activities: science jokes, mime
- Action: funny gestures, postures
- Verbal (most commonly used)

Sexual Harassment Policy at UCM

Harassment that is not sexual in nature but is based on gender, sex-stereotyping, or sexual orientation also is prohibited by the University's nondiscrimination policies if it is sufficiently severe to deny or limit a person's ability to participate in or benefit from University educational programs, employment, or services. While discrimination based on these factors may be distinguished from sexual harassment, these types of discrimination may contribute to the creation of a hostile work or academic environment. Thus, in determining whether a hostile environment due to sexual harassment exists, the University may take into account acts of discrimination based on gender, sex-stereotyping, or sexual orientation.

To Be Avoided!

- Definite no-no's:
 - Sexual jokes
 - Religious jokes
 - Cultural jokes
 - Political jokes
 - Bad words
 - A joke directly addressed to one student or one group in your classroom
 - Humor in the form of “making fun” of a specific student or specific group in your classroom

Cultural Diversity on UCM Campus

Ethnicity	Fall 2005	Fall 2006	Fall 2007	Fall 2008	Fall 2009	Fall 2010
African-American	6.10%	5.70%	5.90%	6.10%	6.80%	6.20%
Asian/ Pacific Islander	35.30%	34.20%	31.30%	30.80%	30.80%	28.20%
Hispanic	23.90%	25.50%	28.00%	28.90%	31.00%	33.80%
Native American	0.80%	0.70%	0.70%	0.60%	0.70%	0.50%
Pacific Islander	0.70%	0.40%	0.40%	0.50%	0.50%	0.60%
White	26.30%	25.70%	25.10%	24.40%	22.70%	21.50%
2 or more races	N/ A	N/ A	N/ A	N/ A	N/ A	2.70%
Nonresident Alien	0.90%	1.60%	2.80%	3.50%	3.20%	1.80%
Decline to State/ Unknown	6.10%	6.20%	5.80%	5.20%	4.40%	4.70%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Cultural considerations for use of humor and setting boundaries: verbal language, body language, touching, ...

What Do You Think? Right or Wrong?

Scenario: It's Ash Wednesday. The TA walks into the class and Sarah, a student, has a cross of ashes on her forehead in observance of Ash Wednesday. Mike enters the class and, with a big smile, call out loud: "Hey Sarah, you probably haven't looked at yourself in the mirror today. You've got something on your forehead, it makes you look like a shooting target."

- What if the comment was from the TA, and not Mike?
- What if Sarah and Mike are really close friends?

Black, White, or Grey?

- (Humor) Text a funny joke to a few students whom you have their phone numbers?



Black, White, or Grey?

- (Boundary) Hug a student/ students for good-bye after the class ends?



So How About Profanity?

- Use of profanity is actually not directly prohibited according to UCM's policy.
- Keep in mind that students should feel safe and comfortable.
- There's a fine balance between academic freedom of speech and sexual harassment.

Conclusion

- Use of humor in teaching can be very constructive
- Sometimes there's a fine line between humor and sarcasm, disrespect, or even an offense
- Students have different standard for what's considered humor based on their background
- All of that said, don't become obsessive about it. Allow for humor to naturally arise.

Resources

- UC's Sexual Harassment Policy: <http://www.ucop.edu/ucophome/coordrev/policy/PP021006Policy.pdf>
- UCM's Ethnicity Statistics: <http://ipa.ucmerced.edu/docs/campus%20enrollment/Ethnicity.pdf>
- A few articles:
 - Caught (unfortunately) on Tape: <http://chronicle.com/article/Caught-Unfortunatly-on-Tape/3251/>
 - Stop Me if You've Heard This One: <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/stop-me-if-youve-heard-this-one-the-benefits-of-humor-in-the-classroom/>
 - Humor in TEYL – Reducing Classroom Anxiety <http://www.teyl.org/article2.html>

Exemplars in this category are represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Student Comments Related to Professorial Personal Qualities

Professorial Personal Qualities (Positive Comments)	Professorial Personal Qualities (Negative Comments)
• Wants everyone to succeed	• Demonstrated little to no interest in students
• Passionate about what she does	• Extremely rude and judgmental
• Good sense of humor	• Embarrassing, made fun of my hometown
• Fun, excited, and loves teaching	• Treats you like you are 3
• Open minded and always willing to help you, even after you leave class.	• Doesn't care what students think and doesn't stop to ask
• Genuinely cares about each and every one of her students	• Likes to pick people out of the room, question them, and makes them feel stupid
• Enthusiasm makes the dry material interesting	• Her thick accent makes it so hard to understand what she is trying to say.
• I can tell she loves her job with the glow she comes to class with	• Intimidating at our expense -- I think he enjoys this
• Great heart	• Cries in class and is opinionated
• Honestly interested in me as a person	• Vulgar and unprofessional; kind of lazy

This handout was used in the workshop; it is from Valeri Helterbran, "The Ideal Professor: Student Perceptions of Effective Instructor Practices . . ." *Education*, vol 129, #1 (2008). Helterbran researched student comments on Ratemyprofessor.com.

Exemplars in this category are represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Student Comments Related to Professorial Knowledge and Presentation

Professorial Knowledge & Presentation (Positive Comments)	Professorial Knowledge & Presentation (Negative Comments)
Knowledgeable and motivational professor	Knowledgeable, but not interested in presenting it well
Knows her stuff; Puts information on playing field students can understand	Very confused. He may have some knowledge but he does not know how to deliver it
She's so intelligent.	Can't tell what she knows
Willing to go above and beyond	He doesn't make it come to life
Forces you out of your comfort level -- a good thing	I don't think she knew what she was doing; too repetitive
She is excited about the subject which makes me excited, too.	Knows what to tell you about how to teach, but doesn't utilize it himself
An expert, but doesn't make you feel inferior	She knows all the vocabulary of technology, but doesn't know how to use it to teach
Knows what he is talking about and prepares you well	Has a narrow knowledge base which influences her opinions
Knows the subject inside and out and wants you to, too	Not sure what he knows, just reads from the packet

from Valerie Heltunbrun, "The Ideal Professor:
Student Perceptions of Effective Instructor
Practices, Attitudes & Skills," Education, Vol 129,
#1 (2008).