

VIEWPOINTS

Use of Humor to Enhance Learning: Bull's Eye or Off the Mark

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Humor as a pedagogical tool can be like walking on a tightrope. If done well, it could enhance learning or at the very least make learning more fun. However, if not done well, it could have disastrous consequences. I remember a few years ago attending a webinar on use of humor and I found it to be so ineffective and boring that it was funny. Fun is 1 of the 5 primary human needs along with survival, belonging, power, and freedom.¹

There are various positive ways to incorporate humor into the classroom.² Humor can include funny stories and comments; jokes (especially self-deprecating ones); professional humor, such as linking content to mnemonic devices; cartoons; puns; riddles; top 10 lists; and comic verses. Humor can be used as an icebreaker, such as having students share their experience about a comical moment in a classroom. Humor can be used effectively to deal with classroom management issues such as instructor's top 10 peeves. Humor can also be used to deal with sensitive topics to help students feel comfortable discussing those topics in the class. Humor can be useful for tedious and difficult subject matter. These positive ways can hit the target.

There are also negative ways to use humor including sarcasm, especially if directed at students. Harmful effects of humor can be distracting in the classroom. Negative humor could dampen students' motivation for the class and thus hinder learning. Lei summarized the drawbacks of humor on learning which included degrading remarks of students, offensive humor, and excessive humor.¹ References to a person's ethnic or sexual characteristics or to their appearance or a disability are inappropriate. These negative attempts at humor would be off the mark.

Chabeli provided guidelines to facilitate learning through the effective use of humor.³ This author stated that students should connect the curriculum with fun. Using humor that is natural and spontaneous is best. Using facial expressions, such as a smile, enhances the effectiveness of humor. Hellman suggested 7 simple steps for

using humor in the classroom including be yourself, pick your spots, be politically correct, know your audience, use oxymorons and acronyms, sometimes be quiet, and acknowledge others' humor.⁴ Remember faculty members are not stand-up comedians. Humor provides a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom which is an environment conducive to learning, creativity, and critical thinking. It also makes the learning process more fun. When a faculty member is using humor, students need to perceive the faculty member as a caring human being. Appropriate use of humor can enhance a sense of community, foster openness and respect, and could contribute to effective learning.

The value of the use of humor is mixed.⁵ Lei outlined 31 benefits of humor including: psychological, social, and cognitive, in which there is research evidence.¹ Many of the benefits are theorized and not substantiated by rigorous research methods. Hackathorn et al showed that humor increases learning at the knowledge and comprehension levels of Bloom's taxonomy but not at the application level.⁶ Appropriate use of humor can enhance retention, increase learning, improve problem solving, relieve stress, reduce test anxiety, and increase perceptions of faculty credibility.⁷ It also enhances students' attitudes toward the faculty member and can make the faculty member more likeable. Torok reported on the relationship between use of humor and faculty members who were favored by students.⁷ There are gender differences in student perceptions of effective use of humor. Use of humor by women tends to be less frequently appreciated. This report consisted of faculty members from the disciplines of biology, educational psychology, and theater. This leads us to hypothesize about the role of humor in pharmacy education. Do pharmacy faculty members need to learn how to use humor as an instructional strategy? Does pharmacy education benefit from the use of humor?

The paucity of research documenting the value of humor in pharmacy education and also medical education is noted.⁸ Most of the literature related to use of humor as a tool to enhance learning is found in the nursing literature. The research literature involves 3 categories: (1) use of humor for learning; (2) student evaluations of faculty members who use humor; and (3) effects of use

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of classroom humor on student performance, especially on examinations. There are numerous challenges for providing clear scientific evidence of the value of humor in pharmacy education. These challenges include the difficulties of controlling for other aspects of the learning environment such as the instructional methods used by faculty members, the academic quality of the students, and student appreciation for humor. There is probably a need for research on the role of humor in pharmacy education as no reports were found in the literature.

There is a Humor Orientation (HO) Scale that measures an individual's predisposition to convey humorous messages.⁹ Wanzer found that student perceptions of faculty members with a high HO tend to result in higher student perceptions of learning.⁵ Can faculty members with low HO learn to use humor effectively as a pedagogical tool? There are numerous techniques that can be learned and resources available by Ronald Berk.^{10,11} Some would argue that as there is contradictory evidence of benefits of use of humor on learning, why would you want to learn to use humor if you are not naturally humorous? Like physicians, pharmacist faculty members desire to have clear scientific evidence to support innovative instructional strategies outside of one's comfort zone.¹²

Today's generation of students expect learning to be enjoyable. At one time, there was no place for humor in the classroom.⁷ But now, the time for a stern professor as the "sage on the stage" is no longer acceptable. Humor creates a relaxed, engaging, and safe environment. It has been suggested that using humor as a pyromaniac can fuel the fires of curiosity in our students.⁷ Even if there is a paucity of scientific data proving the benefits of humor in pharmacy education, should we not want to make learning

fun? As Thomas Edison said: "I never did a day's work in my life – it was all fun."¹³

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