

No Laughing Matter: Humor in the English Language Arts Classroom

Humor can be an intense strengthener or a devastating destructor of the classroom environment. Depending on how it is used, it could make a teacher a legend or it could make a teacher a laughingstock. Many studies have been performed in the past two decades which have attempted to unravel an age-old riddle: how can a teacher be funny in the classroom without 1) turning students off, 2) losing control of the class, or 3) being labeled as a buffoon? This review correlates the findings of these studies, pointing out similarities and differences in the results in an attempt to show which types of humor are appropriate in the classroom, who should utilize them, and in what manner they should be utilized. Seven empirical studies are discussed, each attempting to sort out humor and to define its accessibility and, perhaps, necessity in the classroom.

**Dave Emke
State University of New York at Cortland
AED 663 – Dr. Mary Kennedy
Spring 2007**

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Dave Emke

Abstract

Humor can be an intense strengthener or a devastating destructor of the classroom environment. Depending on how it is used, it could make a teacher a legend or it could make a teacher a laughingstock. Many studies have been performed in the past two decades which have attempted to unravel an age-old riddle: how can a teacher be funny in the classroom without 1) turning students off, 2) losing control of the class, or 3) being labeled as a buffoon? This review correlates the findings of these studies, pointing out similarities and differences in the results in an attempt to show which types of humor are appropriate in the classroom, who should utilize them, and in what manner they should be utilized. Seven empirical studies are discussed, each attempting to sort out humor and to define its accessibility and, perhaps, necessity in the classroom.

Introduction

In the English Language Arts classroom, perhaps more so than in any other classroom, the personality of the teacher plays a major role in the level of learning a student can achieve. Humor is used in all social contexts, so it is only natural that it be used in the classroom as well. Because of the potentially delicate nature of the teacher-student relationship, however, the type and amount of humor which should be employed in an educational setting has long been a topic of debate. In the ELA classroom, where emphasis is placed upon creativity and personal voice, humor is an obvious technique which can be employed to keep students' attention while also conveying information and provoking the growth of knowledge.

English Journal is often filled with short pieces from teachers lauding the power of humor (see, for example, Sudol, 1981; Boerman-Cornell, 1999; Nilsen and Nilsen, 1999). Given that humor is a very subjective device, however, it is problematic to generalize by saying that what works for one particular teacher in one classroom will work for any other particular teacher in any other classroom. Bryant and Zillman (1988) agree, saying "extreme caution should be taken when generalizing about the results of using

humor in teaching. When applied to the so-called average teacher, the unbridled claims for success with humor use by teachers who report their experiences in the trade journals may be overly optimistic and liberal" (p. 52). Generalizations about specific pieces of humor and their employability in the classroom are dangerous propositions, because "more reserved teachers should not expect the same sort of results from humor use as the so-called 'off the wall' teacher for whom humor is a natural outgrowth" (Bryant and Zillman, 1988).

While specific examples of humor may not be transferable from classroom to classroom, it may be possible to make statements about what broad types of humor are preferable for teachers to utilize. A major question in the literature to date has been *what types of humor are most utilizable for each type of teacher?* This is an issue which has been tackled in empirical studies by researchers such as Check (1986); Masten (1986), Darling and Civikly (1987); Gorham and Christophel (1990); Neuliep (1991), White (2001); and Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk and Smith (2006). Within these studies, different genres of humor have been looked at from different perspectives, both from teacher and student, and an attempt to answer the above question has been made. While it is impossible to track down a perfect brand of humor which will work for every teacher in every situation, the potential to find approaches to humor which will be beneficial in a large number of classroom does exist.

Background Information

Humor is one of the most natural techniques in the human repertoire for diffusing tension and for lightening the mood in a potentially hostile situation. It has been a long standing misconception, however, that humor has only recently, at the end of the twentieth century, found a place in the high-school classroom. Highet (1963, cited in Bryant and Zillman, 1988) writes that Renaissance teachers used humor to make "games out of the chores of learning difficult subjects" in lieu of "beating their pupils," and, in the process, made "the process of learning perfectly delightful" (p. 219). While this tactic may not be a novel one in the classroom, it remains one which must be dealt with carefully and precisely. Incorrect or inappropriate use of humor in the classroom may result in alienation of students or disciplinary action against the teacher. Humor is a delicate subject which must be handled in the most appropriate manner possible at all times.

Sudol (1981) writes of the potential pitfalls of humor in the classroom and the ways he avoids falling into those traps. The potential ill-effects of humor he discusses in his article include turning the classroom into a zoo, putting an emphasis on humor instead of content, and creating a legacy as a jokester instead of as a good teacher. These are likely concerns every teacher has when contemplating the amount and type of humor he/she will be willing to employ, and they are, of course, issues which must be taken into account. These downfalls could be avoided by making sure not to rely too much on humor. Humor is a valuable tool, but it is important to remember that the main goal in the classroom should be educating students, not making them laugh.

Despite the main goal in the classroom being education, humor does not and should not have to be eliminated altogether. According to Highet (1963), a "wise teacher will continue to introduce flashes of humor extraneously, because he knows that fifty-five minutes of work plus five minutes' laughter are worth twice as much as sixty minutes of unvaried work" (p. 60). In fact, studies have shown that humor drawn from the curriculum is very effective in the eyes of students and helps them to better internalize concepts. Boerman-Cornell (1999), among his five basic intents of humor, lists *humor drawn from literature* as a way to let students into the world of the author. He specifically mentions scenes from *Moby Dick* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* in which students can find humor and enjoy classic literature at the same time. Wanzer et al. (2006) come to a similar conclusion through empirical research, where they report that "almost half (47%) of ... student-generated examples of appropriate humor involved teacher humor linked to the course material" (p. 184). Humor, when employed properly, can not only be an agent for creating a healthy atmosphere in the classroom, but it can also be a catalyst for learning. Beyond simple laughter, however, humor integrated directly and overtly into curriculum can be used as a tool for stimulating critical learning, as "the interpretation of humor requires insight and thinking skills" (Whitmer, 1986).

Method

Ideally, this review would concern studies which focus on humor in the English Language Arts classroom setting only. However, as humor is more of a factor of human personality and not a strictly pedagogical tool, its role is cross-curricular in nature. The research has born this out, as studies from the fields of English, communications, psychology, and physical education, to name a few, are cross-referenced within one another. This cross-pollination of the research in the literature shows that the topic is not grounded within any one field, as well as that research within any of these subjects would also be applicable to any of the others.

Given this understanding, the present review takes into account research done in many fields outside of English Language Arts. It is important to understand that humor can not be pigeonholed as *humor appropriate for English class*, *humor appropriate for history class*, *humor appropriate for math class*, etc. Humor, while it can and should be related to a curriculum, is not tied to any one curriculum. Humor that works in one class should work in another. However, the question remains as follows: what types of humor are appropriate in the classroom?

In an attempt to answer this question, the empirical studies discussed herein have been chosen for their extensive listings of genres of humor, their diverse techniques for eliciting responses from students and teachers regarding the appropriateness of each genre, and their explicit statistical results showing unequivocally which humor is "good" and which is "bad" for each test group. Armed with this information, teachers should be able to determine what types of humor to lean upon and what types to avoid.

Results and Discussion

The quantitative studies referenced herein break down the varieties of humor potentially used in the classroom and analyze how students react to each subject/tactic in the range. Quality percentages are assigned to different approaches to humor and how effective each is for facilitating both learning and teacher-student relations.

Several of these studies (Darling and Civikly, 1987; Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Wanzer et al., 2006) ask students to list which types of classroom humor they feel “work” and which “don't work,” in an attempt to sort out which forms of humor are appropriate for the classroom and which are inappropriate. Check (1986), not studying specific types of humor, simply asks students if they feel humor is an effective strategy for teachers to employ in the classroom. Neuliep (1991) takes a completely different approach, asking teachers to analyze and assess the humor they employ in the classroom, in an attempt to discover what types of humor teachers find appropriate and inappropriate. White (2001), meanwhile, gets the best of both worlds by giving questionnaires to both students and teachers in an effort to make a comparison between what teachers think “works” and what students think “works,” thereby showing disparities which exist between teachers' and students' feelings about humor in the classroom. A slightly different

manner of research is taken by Masten (1986), who uses artificial measures to analyze the way children perceive humor and how it may or may not stimulate their learning processes.

The studies which ask for input from students alone each use questionnaires to glean the attitudes about humor from the students studied. Check (1986) was not specifically searching for the role of humor in the classroom, but questions on his survey relating to humorous practice in the classroom resulted in humor being tagged as one of the traits of an “effective” teacher according to the students surveyed, with "93 percent view[ing] humor as an essential ingredient in teaching" (p. 330). This result was uniform in Check's study across disciplines and grade levels, although humor was viewed as least important by the eighth-grade students in the study.

While Check's study, at least in terms of analyzing the role of humor, was rather simple, the other studies mentioned above take a much deeper look at the specific function of humor in the classroom setting. Darling and Civikly (1987) had 180 undergraduate college students listen to one of six audio-recorded lectures (each of the six with different combinations of humor style/gender of lecturer) and complete questionnaires on which they make judgments about the teachers delivering the lectures. Gorham and Christophel (1990) asked undergraduate students to fill out observation forms on professors for five consecutive class sessions, detailing specific examples of attempts at humor the professors made during those sessions; these results were compared with questionnaire results detailing the cognitive and affective learning afforded by the same professors, and the results were correlated to determine the effect of the professors' humor on the way they were perceived by students. Wanzer et al. (2006) also worked with college undergraduates, asking them to describe specific examples of appropriate and inappropriate humor they have witnessed in their classrooms. The responses given were then lumped into categories and analyzed to determine which forms of humor fit best into each category.

The results of these studies are not particularly surprising. Tendentious humor (derogatory or hostile humor, ridiculing others, etc.) is looked upon negatively by students: its use is viewed as "defensive" (Darling and Civikly, 1987) and it "negatively influence[s]" students (Gorham and Christophel, 1990). Wanzer et al. (2006), meanwhile, note that "42% of the inappropriate humor examples fell into the 'disparaging humor: targeting students' category" (p. 185). Specific examples of these inappropriate uses of humor included *teacher referred to a group of students as "the living brain dead," one teacher actually advised girls to take home education instead of physical education, teacher made a very sexual comment in class towards a female and then he laughed, and the student was of Indian decent and a practicing Hindu ... the teacher mocked him by saying, "go worship your cow"* (Wanzer et al., 2006, Table 3). One would think it would be obvious for teachers to understand that they should not make such demeaning remarks to students; however, this apparently is not the case.

The reasons teachers believe they should use humor in the classroom are researched by Neuliep (1991). In his survey of 388 public-high-school teachers in Brown County, Wisconsin, *putting students at ease* was labeled as the most frequently used reason for utilizing humor in the classroom, following closely by *attention-getting device* and *showing the teacher is human*. In addition, the teachers were asked to look at the thirteen types of humor utilized by college teachers as reported by Gorham and Christophel (1990) and to rate the appropriateness of such humor in their high-school classrooms. Neuliep's study shows that these high-school teachers "do not perceive the humor of college teachers as necessarily inappropriate" (p. 353), which lends credence to the idea of using the results of collegiate-level studies when discussing the usage of humor in the high-school classroom. The humor is deemed appropriate across educational boundaries, and, therefore, the results can be viewed as universal as well.

What teachers find appropriate and useful does not always correlate with what students find appropriate and useful, and this was taken up by White (2001). In a survey of 128 Arkansas college professors and 206 college students from 65 different institutions, White attempted to determine whether positions about the use of humor in the classroom are consistent among both professors and students. While teachers' reasons for employing humor and students' perceptions of the teachers' humor seem to match up statistically, there is variation in some cases for when teachers feel humor is appropriate as opposed to when students feel the same way. For example, 59% of students surveyed believed it would be appropriate for a professor to use humor to diffuse an unpleasant situation while only 15% of college professors surveyed felt the same way. White posits that this maybe be due to a belief among faculty that "humor use might exacerbate a difficult situation," thus causing them to be "fearful of inserting humor into the situation" (p. 346). Whether or not White's interpretation of the results is correct, the disparity itself shows that there is some distance between the humor a teacher is willing to use and the humor a student might find most beneficial to the classroom environment.

Masten (1986) took a completely different approach to her study: she created artificial humorous situations for children aged ten-to-fourteen (grades five through eight) and then attempted to relate their appreciation, comprehension, and production of humor with their behavior, reputation, and achievement in the classroom. Children were asked to watch cartoons and rate how funny they were (appreciation), then were asked to explain why the cartoon was funny or not (comprehension), and finally were prompted to create their own cartoons by filling in a caption on a comic such as Ziggy (production). Their responses were scored and matched with their individual classroom aptitudes. Masten claims her study showed that "humor and competence are positively related," and that students "who expressed these humor abilities were viewed by their teachers as more effectively engaged in the classroom and more attentive, cooperative, responsive, and productive" (p. 469). The results of this study show that an ability to enjoy and appreciate humor is a symbol of an ability to have good classroom experiences. Therefore, incorporating enjoyable humor in the classroom is an important factor in reaching those students who can appreciate it.

Critique and Evaluation of Studies

The main critique with these studies is the highly subjective nature of determining what type of humor "works" and what "doesn't." This is shown in the overlap, even within a single study, of humor being labeled as appropriate and humor being labeled as inappropriate. For example, Wanzer et al. (2006) report that "humor targeted at students is identified as both appropriate and inappropriate. When identified as appropriate, students described the humor as teasing, but when identified as inappropriate, students described the humor more negatively" (p. 193). Wanzer et al.'s categories of sarcasm, personal stories, and jokes also weigh prominently in both the appropriate and inappropriate categories. They list several reasons why these overlaps may have occurred: "the content of the humorous behavior, the instructor's skill at delivering the humor, or the nature of the existing student-teacher relationship" (p. 193). These are all valid reasons why humor delivered by one teacher in one situation might be considered appropriate, while the exact same humor delivered by another teacher elsewhere might be deemed inappropriate. Some teachers simply are not naturally extroverted or comfortable being humorous, and their attempts at being humorous may be deemed inappropriate by students simply because of the awkwardness of the attempts. Beneficial future research into this topic might take into account teachers of different ages and reputations and give them identical humorous situations in which to interact with students, in an attempt to discover how students react to the same stimulus as delivered by very different teachers.

"A Systematic Sensitization Sequence Designed to Help Instructors Become More Comfortable Using Humor in the Classroom" is spelled out by Weaver and Cotrell (1987, cf. Figure 1). While their step-by-step how-to for integrating humor into the classroom is very specific and inclusive, it seems ludicrous to imply one can change his/her natural demeanor by following ten simple steps. Weaver and Cotrell's steps range from "1. Smile/Be lighthearted." through "3. Foster an informal climate/be conversational and loose." to "10. Tell a joke or two. Do outrageous things. Admit you're no good at it. Appear human." While these are common sense attributes of a humor-infused classroom, this is not something into which any teacher can just magically transform. In addition, teachers who try too hard to be funny when they are not intrinsically likely to do so may lose the respect of students. Gorham and Christophel (1990) sum this up: "Students might enjoy Joan Rivers as a teacher but put little stock in what she teaches them" (p. 59).

Conclusion

There is no reason to doubt the value of humor in the English Language Arts classroom. English is a subject in which creativity and colorfulness should be celebrated, and therefore the ability to appreciate, comprehend, and produce humor (Masten, 1986) is of obvious importance. While the present review is far from a comprehensive study into the research which has been done on the topic, the literature discussed here has done nothing to discount this theory. What it has done is set guidelines for what are and what are not appropriate and acceptable forms of humor in the classroom.

Most obviously, the literature shows that tendentious humor is not appropriate for a healthy classroom environment (Darling and Civikly, 1987; Gorham and Christophel, 1990; White, 2001; Wanzer et al., 2006). This backs up the “unqualified claims” (Bryant and Zillman, 1988) about humor in the classroom presented in professional trade literature. Humor which demeans the gender, religion, intelligence, appearance, or another personal trait of students is, and should be, considered inappropriate (Wanzer et al., 2006). The literature also shows that students are less likely to respect a teacher who uses him/herself as the butt of jokes, or who relies on humor too much (Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Wanzer et al., 2006). Humor needs to be properly delegated, non-hurtful, and kept to a minimum. A good laugh should not be the only thing students take home from class (Sudol, 1981), and the literature has shown that humor based on curriculum content is among the most effective types of humor teachers can utilize (Whitmer, 1986; Boerman-Cornell, 1999; Nilsen and Nilsen, 1999; Wanzer et al., 2006). Despite this, teachers often use humor to “put students at ease, as an attention-getter, [or] as a way of showing the teacher is human ... not as a pedagogical strategy for increasing student comprehension or learning” (Neuliep, 1991).

The literature also shows, for the most part, that what students find acceptable as far as humor is concerned coincides with what most teachers find acceptable (Neuliep, 1991; White, 2001). While there are some discrepancies, such as whether teachers should use humor to diffuse an uncomfortable situation (White, 2001), this relatively standard eye-to-eye agreement on what humor is appropriate and what is not shows that teachers should be comfortable in using their guts to determine whether or not a particular piece of humor will be effective within a classroom context.

This researcher’s own opinion is that teachers who are not naturally jocular or inclined to be humorous should not attempt to “force it” simply because the literature states that humor can be beneficial to a classroom’s atmosphere (Darling and Civikly, 1987; Gorham and Christophel, 1990; White, 2001; Wanzer et al., 2006) or even to the students’ learning abilities (Masten, 1986). While

articles exist in the literature which attempt to “coach” teachers in the art of humor (Weaver and Cotrell, 1987; Boerman-Cornell, 1999), humor is something which comes from within and must be natural in order to be effective. Students see a teacher who is working outside his/her norms as “defensive” (Darling and Civikly, 1987). Darling and Civikly (1987) state that “[t]he social functions of humor concern the effect that humor has on a social setting. Humor can be viewed as a social lubricant and/or irritant depending on how it is viewed by participants in the interaction” (p. 24). Often, activities which are unnatural, which go against the grain, are considered irritants and not lubricants. Therefore, while humor in the classroom is a valuable asset, it is one which must come naturally and must be viewed as such by both teacher and student.

The literature makes many fine arguments for the utilization of humor in the classroom and about the particular manners of humor which should and should not be employed. All told, though, there is not much in the literature which can not be determined by pure common sense: respect the students as well as the curriculum, act naturally (as much like a human as possible), and promote a positive classroom atmosphere. Humor can be a pertinent part of each one of these facets of good teaching.

Table 1: Studies and Results

Study	Date	Method	Results	Conclusion
Check	1986	747 college students, 104 senior-high-school students, and 93 eighth-graders were administered a questionnaire regarding various teaching methods.	“93 percent viewed humor as an essential ingredient in teaching.”	Humor is not only valuable in the classroom, the ability to be humorous is essential in order to be considered an effective teacher.
Darling & Civikly	1987	180 college students (30 per lecture) listened to six audio-taped lectures. Each lecture (three from a male teacher, three from a female) was identical, with the exception of different types of humor inserted into each.	“Humor that is not perceived as being open, honest and spontaneous may be more destructive to the communicative climate than an absence of humor.”	When humor is forced (a “strategic communicator”), students find it defensive.

Gorham & Christophel	1990	206 college students were asked to fill out a questionnaire reporting their cognitive and affective learning in a class. They were then asked to observe the professor for five class sessions, keeping a log of the humor utilized in the classroom.	“The volume of humor alone is not as important as the composite of humor.”	“Teachers with very low overall immediacy may not benefit from increasing the proportion of positive humor.”
Masten	1986	32 fifth-graders, 23 sixth-graders, 22 seventh-graders, and 16 eighth-graders were exposed to a series of tests which determined their level of appreciation of humor. These results were compared with each student’s performance in the classroom.	“Better humor production, comprehension, and greater mirth were associated with academic and social competence.”	Students who have a grasp of humor and appreciate its use tend to perform better in the classroom than those who do not possess these attributes.
Neuliep	1991	388 public-high-school teachers filled out questionnaires on which they were asked to describe the types of humor they use in their classrooms.	“Most teachers indicated that they use humor as a way of putting students at ease, as an attention-getter, as a way of showing that the teacher is human ... and	Teachers feel that humor is important in the classroom, but not as a pedagogical tool—simply as classroom management.

			not as a pedagogical strategy for increasing student comprehension or learning.”	
Wanzer, et al.	2006	284 college students were asked to list examples of appropriate and inappropriate humor they have witnessed in classroom situations.	“Instructors should avoid using humor targeting a particular student or group of students and joking about a student’s intelligence, personal life/interests, appearance, gender, or religion.”	Appropriate humor is related to the curriculum and is non-offensive in nature. Inappropriate humor singles students out, belittles, and is generally offensive in some way.
White	2001	128 college professors and 206 college students filled out similar surveys which asked in what manners humor should and should not be utilized in the classroom.	“Both faculty and students believe humor should be or had been used to relieve stress, gain attention, and	Students and teachers agree, for the most part, on the ways humor can and should be used in the classroom.

			create a healthy learning environment.”	
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