

A Schema Walks into a Bar ... How Humor Makes Us Better Teachers by Helping Our Students Learn

Brutal Choices in Curricular Design ... is a regular feature of Perspectives, designed to explore the difficult curricular decisions that teachers of legal research and writing courses are often forced to make in light of the realities of limited budgets, time, personnel, and other resources. Readers are invited to comment on the opinions expressed in this column and to suggest other “brutal choices” that should be considered in future issues. Please submit material to Helene Shapo, Northwestern University School of Law, e-mail: h-shapo@law.northwestern.edu, or Kathryn Mercer, Case Western Reserve University School of Law, e-mail: klm7@case.edu.

By James B. Levy

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Humorous teachers often get a bad rap. Not among students, of course, but among their colleagues—you know, the ones who vote on retention and renewal decisions. A professor who develops a reputation for being humorous in the classroom or otherwise adopting an entertaining style can be seen as someone who panders to students. Good teachers should strive to stimulate students’ intellect, not their funny bone, the critics say. They’ll tell you that humor is for stand-up comics; seeking laughs in the law school classroom is both undignified and anti-intellectual. Right? Well, not so fast Langdell-breath.

The view that professors who incorporate humor into their teaching are somehow less worthy of respect or less competent than their humorless colleagues is both unfair and inaccurate. To the contrary, humor, provided it relates to the material, is an extremely effective technique that can engage students more deeply on a cognitive level than a similar non-humorous explanation. That’s because humor is usually grounded in an incongruity that piques our thinking and challenges expectations. Apart from the cognitive benefits, humor helps

teachers establish a socio-emotional classroom atmosphere that is better suited to learning. Indeed, several studies involving undergraduate students show that there are a myriad of ways in which humor has a positive impact on learning. Be aware, though, that humor also has pitfalls that can easily displace all the virtues, so remember to use caution.

As noted, the benefits of humor are manifold. To begin with, it’s axiomatic that students are incapable of learning anything from their teacher unless they are paying attention. Capturing and holding student attention is the linchpin of effective teaching. At the very least, seasoning the day’s lesson with occasional humor that illuminates the material, as opposed to gratuitous humor used merely to entertain students, is an extremely effective way to attract and hold students’ attention.

Beyond serving an attention-getting function, humor assists learning by making the material more memorable to students because it typically engages them more deeply on a cognitive level than a non-humorous explanation of the same point. At the heart of most humor is an incongruity that requires a certain amount of “mental gymnastics” to “get” the joke or understand the punch line. Moreover, that incongruity often activates multiple schemas as well as helping students develop new ones by turning the familiar, if not on its head, at least sideways. In that sense, humor works much like metaphors, which are also very effective tools of intellectual growth, because humor requires students to make mental connections between seemingly disparate areas of knowledge and, thus, is a more immersive cognitive experience. As a result, humor, like a metaphor, “lights up” more parts of the brain in order to process the thought and thus students are more deeply engaged.

Essentially, the brain learns by recording and storing experiences along neurological pathways that we think of in conventional terms as

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“memory.” The brain recalls and relies upon these experiences to tell it what to do when it confronts a new, but similar, problem in the future. The more importance the brain ascribed to the earlier experience, as well as the more widely dispersed that experience was stored within our memory, the easier it will be for the brain to later recall it and the broader range of experiences the brain has to call upon in order to problem solve. Intellectual growth is also about developing new schemas that create new neurological pathways that add to the reservoir of problem-solving tools the brain can call upon when needed. One way to help students develop new schemas is to challenge existing ones, which humor can facilitate.

To use an example that many readers are already familiar with, Professor Sheila Simon’s humorous “lasagna in a blender” analogy shows how humor can be used to engage students more deeply on a cognitive level than a non-humorous explanation of the same point. For those who don’t already know, Professor Simon’s lasagna example makes the point to students that it’s important for them to not only include the right “ingredients” in their office memorandum and briefs (i.e., issue, rule, application, and conclusion), but that those ingredients must also be “prepared,” or organized, according to the audience’s expectations. Professor Simon makes the point by showing a slide of the appalled reaction from dinner guests who are served lasagna made in a blender rather than layered and baked in a pan. The point is made very effectively that the ingredients in IRAC must also be “layered,” or organized, within memoranda and briefs according to the expectations of the lawyers whom they will work for.

This humorous example works as a teaching tool for several reasons. First, the humor itself derives from the incongruous idea of using a blender to make lasagna. For most people, that incongruity is so memorable that it only takes seeing Professor Simon’s PowerPoint slide once to remember it forever. Second, it broadens students’ existing schemas for lasagna regarding its taste and appearance by suggesting an entirely new one concerning the layering of ingredients according to

norms. More relevant to the law professor’s goal is that Professor Simon’s humorous example helps students develop a new schema for IRAC beyond the need to memorize it by showing them the appalled reaction they will get if their memos and briefs are not organized according to professional norms.

Aside from challenging expectations, humor also works because it often packs an emotional punch. That is because humor frequently derives its power by tapping into some uncomfortable or unspoken truth. The emotional “charge” that results can make for a more immersive cognitive experience because, again like metaphors, it activates not only our memory but also our emotions. Any experience that causes an emotional reaction tends to be stored more deeply and widely by the brain than an experience lacking that explicit emotional component. All things being equal, therefore, a point made with humor makes a deeper impression on students, which means it will be easier to recall later.

Beyond all of these cognitive virtues, humor also has socio-psychological benefits because it helps establish a positive classroom rapport between the teacher and students, which is vital to learning. Humor, obviously enough, puts us in a good mood, which makes us more receptive to whatever it is we’re trying to understand. Because pleasurable experiences are typically more memorable than emotionally neutral ones, knowledge imparted in an atmosphere of good humor causes the brain to perceive it as more meaningful than a non-humorous explanation of the same material.

Humor also reduces stress and anxiety among students and, for that reason as well, helps foster a classroom socio-emotional climate that’s conducive to learning. A teacher’s use of self-deprecating humor, in particular, can help reduce anxiety among students who are shy or otherwise reluctant to speak in class since nothing bridges the gap between teacher and students more quickly and effectively than a professor who pokes fun at himself or herself. A teacher who is willing to acknowledge and laugh at his or her own shortcomings can help create a safe classroom atmosphere in which students feel they too can take risks without fear of looking foolish or

feeling shame for having failed. The professor must be careful, though, to not let self-deprecating humor devalue one's personage in front of the students. There's a crucial distinction between laughing at, and denigrating, one's self and it's important to always keep that in mind.

On the downside, humor carries significant risks if it's not used appropriately or with care. Like everything else we do in the classroom, the first rule is that humor should be used only when it serves a concrete pedagogical goal such as aiding understanding of a key point or helping to create a relaxed atmosphere. Humor has no place if it's only purpose is gratuitous entertainment devoid of any substance.

An overarching consideration is that humor often relies on shared assumptions that, in a diverse classroom, might not be held by everyone. What's funny to one group with a common background may be lost on another group or, worse, may be unintentionally hurtful to them. Contrary to the old cliché about "sticks and stones," we all know that words in fact do hurt. Students are especially vulnerable when those hurtful words emanate from a trusted authority figure like a law professor. At best, a sarcastic comment from a professor can demoralize a student and, at worst, it can be an emotionally searing experience that taints the entire school year. Thus, the golden rule of classroom humor should be that it must never be

used at the expense of any individual or group of students. Likewise, be aware that some humor, at least according to the armchair psychologists, is born of anger. Thus, be vigilant about not using humor that may contain an angry or hurtful subtext. To be safe, you may want to avoid sarcasm altogether no matter how tempting it may be at times.

Like all of our interactions in the classroom, a teacher's use of humor should be genuine and thus enhance the teacher's authenticity. It should not be contrived or unnatural; instead one must find a way to make use of humor in a way that is consistent with one's own personality and classroom style. Some people are more naturally adept at pulling it off than others. It's important to know yourself, know what works for you and what doesn't, and then develop a style that incorporates humor in a manner that is consistent with your authentic self. Since few things can bring a class to a screeching halt like a botched attempt at humor, stay within your limits and be yourself. Classroom humor should evince a sense of natural playfulness and fun. In the end, the best advice is to have fun if you're going to be funny.

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Another Perspective

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