

HA-HA AND HIJINKS:

THE EFFECTS OF HUMOR-EMBEDDED INSTRUCTION

Doesn't cost a dime!

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ABSTRACT

In an educational system that overvalues high-stakes testing and undervalues recess, curriculum and teaching methods have become standardized and streamlined, leaving faculty little room to incorporate humor into curriculum at the detriment of educational retention. Research in the field of educational neuroscience supports theories that humor increases long-term memory retention. Research in educational psychology shows the positive effects of humor on classroom environment, student-teacher relationships, and student engagement. This study explored the effects of humor on learning and memory in adult learners. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants from a vocational institution in the southwest United States. Participants were divided into two groups to receive the humor-embedded instruction. After receiving a humor treatment, participants were interviewed with open-ended questions for their reactions to the use of humor, personal enjoyment, and retention of content. Participants responded positively in responses to open-ended interview questions about their experiences with humor in the classroom. The interview data was consistent with the findings of research from the last 20 years that humor indirectly and directly improves learning. Students enjoy humor-embedded instruction. Humor-embedded instruction not only contributes to a positive classroom environment, but it also increases educational retention. The use of humor acts as a stress relief, which aids in cognition and memory. Most importantly, students report that they enjoy humor.

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INTRODUCTION

Research has found that children are unhappier in schools than in any other setting (Gray, 2013). Evidence is growing that schools, with pressures of high stake testing, are responsible for the increasing psychological, emotional, and social disorders in young people (McDonald, 2001; Malpass, 1999). By the time students enter college, they see school as another in a series of hoops to jump through, not a joyful experience (Konrath et al., 2011). This study examined the effect of humor as a best practice in the classroom. Neuroscience has shown a stress-free brain, free from threat, will learn more efficiently and retain information longer (Jensen, 2005). This study showed effective humor-embedded strategies that can be used to increase student engagement and create an enjoyable learning environment and included recommendations to employ humor-embedded instruction in higher education curriculum.

Research question:

What did learners self-report concerning humor embedded-instruction in open-ended interview questions?

REFERENCES

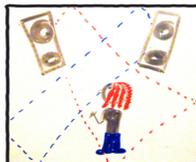
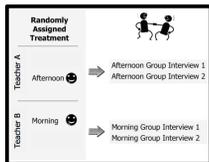


CONTACT

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Sampling

With institutional human subject approval, data were collected at a post-secondary audio recording school, selected for the study because the population, school size, and instructional philosophy aligned with the principles of the study. The school has two campuses within a ten miles radius in a metropolitan area of a suburban U.S. city. Two instructors, one at each campus, taught the same Electrical Theory and Sound Application course. Participants (n=22) self-identified as being between the ages of 19-22 and were demographically similar to the whole school population. Both instructors chosen for this study have similar experience (at this school and in level of education); quality of teaching (as determined by annual evaluations); peer and student recommendations; dispositions and temperaments (as determined by site administrators).



Figural		Verbal	
Comic books	Jokes	Puns	Idioms
Comic strips	Political Cartoons	Parody	Similes
Cartoons	Cartoons	Wit	Metaphors
		Irony	Allegories

Visual (physical)		Auditory	
Impressions	Impressions	Impressions	Impressions
Pantomime	Pantomime	Noises	Noises
Practical Jokes	Practical Jokes	Sounds	Sounds
Sketches	Sketches		
Sight Gags	Sight Gags		

Treatment

The treatment for this study required the collaboration of cooperating instructors and the researcher. The instructors selected sound application lesson they had both taught before, which focused on the following topics: sound reflection, diffraction, condenser microphones, and phase shift. The researcher suggested humor activities, which aligned to common learning styles, to embed in the lesson (Watson, et al, 2006; Schmidt, et al, 2001; Jensen, 2005). For example, the concept of sound reflection was taught using a caricature of a famous person or a student in the class. In another example, the concept of diffraction was taught using a humorous pantomime. The jokes, cartoons, and gags were chosen for the ease of implementation and comfort level of the instructors. Sexual humor was not used in this study. The study required that instructors have access to materials and equipment including: balloons for sight gags and audio equipment for auditory stimuli.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

RESULTS

"BREAKS UP A LESSON LIKE COMING UP FOR AIR BETWEEN CONCEPTS"

Memory Retention

In small group interviews, the participants self-reported that humor makes concepts and lessons memorable. Students said that they remembered jokes and that humor helped them find a connection to the material. One student described the effect on humor on memory: "When humor is relatable, it makes the topic easier to memorize. It's like an acronym. It's a technique that triggers your memory." Another student described the effect of humor similarly when he said humor is like "hanging the information on a hook in your brain so you'll know where to find it later." The jokes and humor created a memorable experience.

Comic Relief

Students also reported that humor reduced stress, having a calming effect that allows them to take in more information. One student shared that humor "breaks up the lesson like coming up for air between concepts. Humor allowed them to learn better, and made the classroom more comfortable."

Community Building

Another student commented on the connection between teacher and student, "There wasn't too much space between the students and the teacher." Humor can build community and reduce distance between people. When students do not feel the separation of "us" and "them," they are more likely to take risks and be more creative in the classroom (Erickson and Feldstein, 2006).

Praise for Teachers

Instructors were viewed as friendly, animated and down-to-earth. One student noted humor brought life and character to the lesson. When asked about their past experiences with humor in the classroom, one student recalled that "My favorite teacher was funny" and "I learned the most from funny teachers".

Cautions

Participants expressed they have had a positive experience with the humor in the classroom, but not always. Students reported that humor is not effective when it is not in good taste, at the cognitive level of the group, off topic, or when it is overused. Humor itself may be a learning style, and may not be good for those who are more serious.

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HUMOR TREATMENTS BY CONCEPT AND LEARNING STYLE

Concept	Learning Style	Humor lesson
Sound Reflection	Visual-Figural	Draw a room with speakers. At the center of the room, draw a student or a familiar person where the sound concludes.
Diffraction	Visual	Mime the actions of a person being overcome by a big wave to show that small objects do not obstruct large sound waves.
Phase Shift	Auditory	Imitate the sound of a nasally, nagging person like Erle to demonstrate the sound of phase shift.
Phase vs. Polarity	Verbal	Introduce an audio clip that demonstrates out of phase with a silly noise.

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DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Participants responded to seven open-ended interview questions in small groups (n=6). The researcher transcribed student responses during the interview and later coded the responses thematically for threads of connection and relationships (Fowler, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Questions regarded what the participants liked and remembered most about the class and past experiences with humor in the classroom.

BENEFITS

- Jokes are free.
- Learning environment is more enjoyable.
- Humor is like a stress release valve.
- Faculty can use humor to approach sensitive topics and ease tension in the classroom.
- The use of humor in instruction has the ability meld a group of individuals into a community where it is a safe place to take academic risks.

IMPLICATIONS

- Opportunity for teacher training: Humor and improvisation as teaching skills?
- Gap in research: How can we teach healthy humor to prevent bullying?
- Instructional design: How does humor translate into e-learning?

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