

# Online Humor: Oxymoron or Strategic Teaching Tool

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## Abstract

As more courses are offered in an online delivery format, instructors are concerned with the best practices for conducting an online course. There is one tool many have failed to use and that is humor. Multiple studies report the benefits of using humor in a face-to-face environment. Those benefits include creating a more supportive learning environment, retaining knowledge, creating a sense of community, and reducing stress. This integrative literature review describes how humor was successfully used. A description of how humor has been used in online course is presented.

## Introduction

In 1997 Gubernick and Ebeling (as cited in Gaines, 2002) predicted the number of online students would triple by the year 2000. Accordingly, there is a need to address the unique concerns of the online student. The physical separation between student and teacher reduces the personal interaction. The “hallway talk” occurring before and after a class session cannot be replicated in an online format. Another element, spontaneity, is lost. A quip, pun, or humorous story may be difficult to replicate online. The best thing that an instructor can do is to have the students feel a sense of community in a cyber classroom.

The benefits offered by an online delivery method include flexibility, effectiveness, efficiency, multi-sensory experiences, interactivity, and affordability (Deal, 2002). A caveat is that e-learning requires the student to adapt to a new learning approach. Going from a face-to-face (F2F) to an online delivery format may be a difficult adjustment for some adult students. There is a pedagogical change from the classroom setting. The online learner needs to be aware of the “interactions between the learner, the tutor, and the teacher” (Helic, Krottmaier, Maurer and Scerbakov, 2005) in an online learning environment.

As there are advances in technology, the transition from a F2F format to an online course is a logical progression. Experts are not certain about the best practices for instruction in these new technologies. Schofield, Walsh and Melville (2001) stated that online courses are a new frontier pedagogically, technologically, and organizationally. Many teachers teach an online course with little preparation and need to be aware of the benefits humor brings.

## Methods

Humor is a broad topic in the sense that the use of humor applies to almost any situation. In the classroom or at the workplace there will be times when humor is used. In conducting the literature review for this article, the subject areas were restricted to education and educational psychology as these two fields are the focus of the research.

A database search for literature on the topic of “humor” in combination with “online education” or “distance education,” resulted in a short list of keyword matches. During the initial research, only James’ (2004) commentary was displayed on the results list. Further searching

was conducted using keyword searching using “adult education” as the main keyword with combinations of “humor,” “online education” and “distance education.” Database searching used ProQuest, First Search (ERIC), and EBSCO periodical databases. There was little overlap or cross referencing between the different databases.

The results of the searches were examined using multiple criteria. The first criterion used was to verify the keywords that the search engine used to locate an article. In some cases, the results listed a match finding one of the keywords when using a compound keyword. An example of this situation was when “online education” was used as one keyword parameter and the search results indicated “education” as the classification. The next criterion was reading the abstract, looking for keywords that may not have been used to classify the document. The final criterion was the title. If the title indicated that the use of humor, or investigating online education, the article was further investigated for inclusion in the literature review. Any results listing only a citation and no other accompanying documentation, such as an abstract, were not selected.

After evaluation of the search engine results, a copy of the article was obtained. The documents were acquired either as an electronic file or through the help of library resources. As each article was read, main points of the study were documented, categorizing the results as per James’ classifications as shown below. The literature review section in articles provided another avenue to locate further research. The majority of the articles selected for this review revealed how humor is used in a F2F delivery method. If a study reported using humor in a portion of online course, that study was evaluated for inclusion.

### Conceptual Framework

Because little research exists that specifically examines the use of humor in online courses, instructors lack a theoretical foundation for effectively using humor in the online environment. Although many of the same issues identified on the use of humor in F2F classes may apply to online courses, the virtual context presents new issues and problems. A preliminary review of the literature shows very little research of the usage of humor in the online delivery platform. In contrast, the extensive research on the use of humor in a F2F environment as documented by James (2004) includes:

1. Creating a more supportive learning environment;
2. Retaining knowledge;
3. Creating a sense of community and;
4. Reducing stress

The following section is divided into two parts. The first section will show studies used to measure the benefits of and the effective use of humor in the face-to-face environment. Next, a review of effective communication in online courses is presented.

#### Humor in the Face to Face Environment

There have been multiple studies (e.g. Ziv, Kaplan and Pascoe, et al) investigating the different applications of how humor can be applied in the classroom as evidenced by summaries below. The results of these studies show the effective use of humor in a F2F delivery mode presenting evidence to support the list of humor benefits shown above.

Creating a More Supportive Learning Environment. Ziv (1979) reported the effects on learning when teaching with humor. The amount and type of humor influences learning (Gorham and Christophel, 1990). Communicative behaviors that enhance physical and psychological closeness have a positive effect on learning outcomes. There is a relationship between a teacher's sense of humor and creating a more favorable climate for learning. Wanzer and Frymier (1999) found that student learning and an instructor's humor orientation was associated with increased perceptions of learning.

Retaining Knowledge. Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) stated that groups receiving lectures with more concept-related humor did significantly better in recalling examples. Although the comprehension was not affected, there was a better recall of humorous examples than the non-humorous examples. Studying the effect of humor vs. non-humor on learning and retention in a computer based science lesson, Snetsinger and Grabowski (1994) found there were no significant differences in terms of learning and retention.

Sense of Community. Stuart and Rosenfeld (1994) examined the relationship between students' perception of teachers' use of humor and classroom climate. Humor is a tool that helps establish rapport between the students and the teacher, producing a better learning community. Hübler and Bell (2003) stated that humor serves as an ethos (the distinguishing characteristic or nature) function in online communities that form around e-mail. Humor can be a central appeal to a group's discourse. The use of humor allows virtual groups to perform social functions, such as hierarchies within, forming and maintaining the community.

Reducing Stress. Flowers (2001) promotes the use of humor in technology education. In this article, a list of when to use and how to use humor is presented in the literature review. Included in this list is stress relief.

#### Effective Communication in Online Learning

As with any endeavor, communication is an important component. In an online environment, the importance is increased. A definition of an online course has the student working in a solitary environment without the direct support of or interaction with the instructor and other students. The instructor of an online course needs to have his/her presence felt in the online delivery format. Although the instructor is not physically present, immediate feedback and the quick answering of questions, build this perception.

Using e-mail or forums such as threaded discussions (similar to a bulletin board system with questions and responses listed chronologically in an electronic format) to post responses creates an electronic dialogue. Instead of listening to a lecture, the students access the learning materials and exchange their ideas and thoughts. Instructors should use written language that includes humor and metaphor (Gibbs and Fewell, 1997) in their responses. This concept applies to e-mail as well as Internet learning materials. Note that the dynamics of class interactions change when the dialogue is shared.

Most frequent e-mail users have had the unpleasant experience of attempting humor in a message only to have the recipient take offense to a message that, if delivered in person, would be received with the expected response. This problem is magnified in threaded discussions because each comment is available to the entire group. Experienced online instructors tend to err on the side of caution in the use of humor. As a result, they could be avoiding the use of an important instructional strategy that demonstrates enhancing learning in F2F courses.

Computer–Mediated Communication. CMC is the “talk” metaphor in an online course. By comparing online interaction to F2F conversation, CMC is more like conversation. This form of communication is interactive, spontaneous, and unplanned.

Adapting asynchronous communication calls for need of CMC (DeBard and Gurdera, 2002). Due to advancement of educational technology as a delivery platform, there is concern over economy and quality of education provided. The authors list seven principles of effective teaching in any environment. The one principle listed is the need for student-faculty contact.

Described in a study by Baym (1995) is the use of humor in CMC communication. The author indicates that there has not been much research in this area. When using CMC, there is a lack of visual and auditory information. This missing information strips cues found in normal speech. Some say that using an electronic communication causes anonymity for the author of the message while others say an identity is created. Humorous performance in the messages creates group solidarity, group identity, and individual identity.

### Findings/Discussion

Communication and an instructor’s presence and support within the virtual classroom are essential elements of effective online instruction. This presence includes timely feedback to the students, accessibility, and the encouragement to build a learning community among the class members. The best way to accomplish this task is through computer-mediated communication. Baym (1995) has shown that humor can be injected in e-mail messages or threaded discussion posts that bring an instructor’s personality to light.

These instructor attributes, such as presence and support, are accomplished with communication. CMC, as noted previously, works well with humor. The unknown variable in this situation is will students know when instructor being humorous? Until the students are familiar with the instructor’s personality and ways of communicating, the humor should be used with caution. If the instructor must interject humor and wants the students to know that the communication was an instance of humor, the use of an emoticon, such as a smiley or frowning face, would be in order.

There is a need for supporting the online delivery method. As stated above, an online student is in a solitary mode with no physical connection to other students or the instructor. The instructor needs to create that support and a favorable climate for learning; at the same time build a sense of community. How the instructor uses the humor, such as establishing rapport will help. Since online is multimedia, humorous graphics of examples can be used in the online environment as well as serious ones. Unfortunately, the humorous example may be recalled more than the serious one.

### Conclusion

As noted in this literature review, many uses of humor have been successfully used in the F2F environment. There are many benefits to using humor such as a creating a supportive learning environment, building a sense of community, and knowledge retention. With the use of humor as a teaching tool, one needs to consider the delivery format. The online format is one of multimedia, using multiple presentation methods of the learning materials to have the students be engaged. The more students are engaged, the more successful the students will be in a course.

Communication is integral in the online delivery method. That communication, that connection will also help create a supportive learning environment and a sense of community among those enrolled in an online course. The presence, be it physical or psychological, will help students be successful in this delivery mode. An instructor has to make their personality come through via communication. As described above, CMC can be an important tool, a method in which to continue the communication between student and instructor as well as between student and student. Threaded discussions would be another tool to increase communication. Until students know you, the instructor as a person, humor in a message may be misunderstood.

There is some crossover from F2F to the online environment. Research indicates there are no significant differences between distance education and face-to-face courses in terms of learning outcomes (Snetsinger and Grabowski, 1994). Usage of humor reviewed can be applied in the online delivery mode. However, the quick quip or pun may not be interpreted correctly in a textual format as opposed to the verbal format. Humor does have many forms such as cartoons, pictures, and sound files. These types of humor could replace any of the banter that normally occurs in a classroom

Further directions for research include replication of reviewed studies in an online delivery method. Little of the treatments or measurement instruments would have to change as to the methodology. The exception to this statement is the sample of study conducted by Ziv (1979) did not include adult learners as subjects. All learning materials used in the replication studies would be uploaded to the course management software for access by the students. The same measuring instruments used in F2F could be used such as surveys or course grades to determine the variables of interest noted in the humor studies.

It is possible that this integrative literature review is not complete. There may be more combinations of keyword searches, subject areas, and authors that could be used or not referenced to in the literature reviewed here. One of the desired outcomes of this article was to initiate the further investigation of the use of a powerful teaching tool, humor, in a different delivery format. One can use humor as a teaching tool regardless of the delivery format.

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