

# The Use of Humor as a Teaching Tool in the College Classroom

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## Abstract

Previous research reports a strong positive correlation between class attendance and student performance. Consequently, college educators, often explore innovative ways of encouraging class attendance. While no substitute for substance, humor is a teaching tool that can create a more positive, fun, interesting environment that promotes class attendance and student learning.

Despite recent widespread attention on the use of humor in our society, this paper identifies some professorial "myths" or misunderstandings about the use of humor in the classroom that continue to exist. These include 1) humor is telling jokes or physical comedy, 2) instructors should not try to use humor because they don't have anything humorous to present or they lack training on the use of humor, and 3) humor wastes precious classroom time and is demeaning to the profession. This paper will also reveal some very real benefits of using humor in the college classroom. Some of the do's and don'ts, advantages and disadvantages of developing/using a humor philosophy or strategy in teaching will be discussed. Different sources and/or types of humor that can be used in college teaching will be identified via some actual, specific examples. In addition, results of student surveys on the use of humor in the classroom will be presented.

## Introduction

As an agricultural economist, I have sometimes wondered if my parent discipline of economics isn't known as the 'dismal' science among students because of too many dry, dismal, boring lectures that have been given on the topic over the years. It was over twenty years ago that I taught my first college-level agricultural economics course and bored my first group of students, while making my first contribution to the 'dismal' science legacy. However, economics professors, who sometimes lecture on monopoly, apparently don't have a monopoly on giving boring lectures. A national survey of more than 250,000 freshmen at universities across the nation (UCLA, 1997) indicated a 30-year record high 36 percent of the students said they were frequently bored in class.

After my first memorable, although not particularly gratifying teaching experience, I told myself that if I were

going to continue college teaching as a career, I had to change how I taught in order to make it fun for not only my students but also me. One of the ways by which I have attempted to do this is with the use of humor in the classroom. Much of the humor that I use is subtle in nature so many of my students are likely to say "what humor?". In this paper, I will share some of my observations, findings, and experiences on the use of humor as an instructional strategy. My goal is to demonstrate how humor might be used in the college classroom so as to maximize its benefits as a teaching tool and, at the same time, minimize its risks to the self esteem and professional reputation of the professor. To accomplish this goal, this paper focuses on three major, related subtopics - 1) what is humor, 2) why use humor in the classroom, and 3) how to use humor in the classroom. Information sources include 1) surveys of students in three of my recently-taught economics classes (see Table 1), 2) numerous books, workshops, and presentations on humor (see Literature Cited), as well as 3) over twenty-plus years of personal experiential learning.

Unfortunately, students often view many of their college classes as 'triple threat' courses - boring, difficult, and stressful. Overcoming these kinds of student perceptions may be one of our greatest challenges in teaching at the collegiate level, especially if we want to motivate students to take additional classes and to even consider pursuing a possible major in our fields of study.

Dullness in the classroom can kill student intellectual interest in any subject and destroy all student desire to pursue additional study in the subject matter area. Teaching effectively requires imagination and creativity to turn students on by turning negative perceptions off. Using humor can be a successful teaching tool for that purpose.

College instructors are often reluctant to use humor as a teaching tool. According to Berk (1998), there are at least three reasons for this. First, professors are not trained in the use of humor as it is not part of any curriculum. Second, professors often believe that they need to have the skills of a professional comedian in order to use humor. Third, professors frequently contend that teaching is serious business and that they are not supposed to be entertainers or use humor which they view as frivolous, undignified and demeaning to the profession. In this paper, I hope to show



Table 1. Student Opinion Survey Results

Part A. Based on their experiences as a student, each student was asked to give their opinion to each statement listed. Students were asked to respond strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree (where there responses were assigned values from 5 to 1 respectively).

Statement	Average Responses*		
	Class #1	Class #2	Class #3
1. I am more likely to skip a class where I find the lectures typically boring.	3.83	3.48	3.83
2. I believe that I have a better sense of humor than most of my instructors.	3.46	3.64	3.96
3. I am more likely to remember class material if it is presented with humor.	4.03	4.02	3.96
4. The use of humor by an instructor is typically a waste of classroom time.	2.03	2.00	2.01
5. I feel more comfortable asking an instructor a question if he/she uses humor in the classroom.	3.97	3.61	3.75
6. An instructor's job is to teach, not entertain.	2.71	2.58	2.75
7. I would rather have an instructor try to be humorous and fail rather than not try to be humorous at all.	3.71	3.43	3.45
8. I am sometimes offended by the use of humor by an instructor.	1.91	2.23	1.94
9. I am more likely to go to a class where the instructor uses some humor.	3.89	4.00	4.05
10. An instructor doesn't have to use humor to be an excellent instructor.	3.71	3.79	3.94
11. I am more likely to pay attention to an instructor if he/she uses humor in a lecture.	3.91	4.07	4.00
12. The only kind of humor in the classroom that I am familiar with is the telling of jokes by the instructor	2.54	2.46	2.24

Part B. Based on their experiences as a student, each student was asked to rank or rate the importance of each of the following ten qualities or traits of an instructor in terms of how important they are to the student if someone wants to be regarded as an excellent instructor by the student.

Item	Rank		
	Class #1	Class #2	Class #3
1. Readily available before or after class or outside of class to answer questions.	10	7	10
2. Fair in grading.	1	1	3
3. Informs in advance as to what to expect in lectures and on tests.	3	4	6
4. Uses humor to make classes more fun or interesting.	8	10	8
5. Is enthusiastic.	5	8	4
6. Can explain difficult concepts.	2	2	5
7. Speaks in a clear, understandable manner.	4	3	2
8. Can relate class material to the real world.	6	5	1
9. Makes efficient use of class time.	9	9	9
10. Writes in clear, understandable manner (e.g. on blackboard, overheads, handouts).	7	6	7

\*Class #1 = responses from 35 students, fall 1996, intermediate microeconomic theory; class #2 = responses from 39 students, fall 1997, intermediate microeconomic theory; and class #3 = responses from 53 students, spring 1998, agri selling.

One-sided z-statistic tests were conducted to determine the probabilities that the reported survey values in Part A are greater (or less) than 3.00. All values are significantly different from 3.00 (neutral opinion) at the 99% confidence level except for statement #6 for class #1 (90% confidence) and class #3 (95% confidence) as well as for statement #12 for class #1 (95% confidence).



that these concerns are largely excuses, misconceptions, or myths.

## What is Humor?

As a student of humor, my definition of humor, which is largely experientially based, is anything that is perceived to be funny, comical, or amusing. Perception is key here. As comedian Steve Allen has observed, "what is funny is a matter of personal opinion". Professors present humorous material only if it is regarded as humorous by their students. Humor, like beauty, is in the eye (and ears?) of the beholder. It's only funny if our students say so.

What do most people, including students, find humorous? Berk (1998) defines humor as "the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life and the artistic expression thereof". This definition of humor implies that most forms of humor are based on incongruity, the juxtaposition of the expected with the unexpected. Humorous material typically has three components - 1) a commonly understood situation, 2) a build-up of anticipation, suspense, or tension, and 3) an unexpected twist, response, or punch line (Berk, 1998).

As expounded on by Berk (1998), the commonly understood situation is one with which everyone in the audience can relate. It is the familiar or 'expected' part of humor that is the premise or the lead-in for the other two elements. If you buy the premise, you buy the joke. A lot of humorous material deals with ordinary, everyday situations. The expected element of humor sets the stage for the build-up of anticipation and the revelation of the unexpected twist. If the audience doesn't understand or isn't familiar with the premise (or is sleeping), they likely won't find the punch line or "in" joke humorous. Great current-day humorists like Bill Cosby and Dave Barry don't tell jokes as much as they take commonly understood things and exaggerate them or point out the absurdity in them. Commonly understood situations for students would include things that are happening at this particular juncture in their lives including dating, living with roommates, dealing with culture shock, having new found freedom from parents, putting up with boring professors, coping with university bureaucracy, having money worries, working, experiencing campus life, etc. As a result, students will often find unexpected, unusual, or exaggerated observations on these situations by anyone (including a professor) to be humorous.

The second element associated with most humorous material is the build-up of anticipation for something to come next. It is unfolding the story, revealing information, in such a way so as to keep the audience hanging and wanting to know the rest of the story. More time will be spent on this element for a humorous story than for a humorous oxymoron

or one-liner.

Humorous items have a common third element which is a sudden and unexpected twist or comment at the end, a quick reversal from sense to nonsense. There is an incongruity between the expected (elements 1 and 2) and the unexpected (element 3). The sharper the contrast and the more sudden it strikes, the more successful it is, usually. Davis (1991) has suggested that it helps to have a twisted mind to notice humorous elements in a given situation; to see the unusual, the ironical, if not the ridiculous, the absurd and the illogical.

## Why Use Humor in the Classroom?

The use of humor in our society has received widespread attention. Numerous experts, most notably outside of education, have espoused the use of humor in their fields for various physiological and psychological benefits that are believed to be associated with laughter and/or humor. Some of these physiological benefits include muscle relaxation, stimulated circulation, improved respiration and exercise of the lungs and chest muscles, increased production of the body's natural pain killers called endorphins, as well as lowered pulse rate and blood pressure. For those who don't like to exercise, laughter has even been suggested as a possible extremely tempting alternative (Berk, 1998). Positive psychological effects of laughter include reduced anxiety and stress, greater self esteem, and increased self motivation (Berk, 1998). Not coincidentally, perhaps, the use of humor has been recommended as a business management tool that promotes a productive work environment (Kushner, 1990), as an effective health care tool (Clifford, 1996), and as a possible tool to improve interpersonal relationships (Sidey, 1994).

While there are these noted physiological and psychological benefits associated with humor, the one main reason for using humor in the classroom is to improve student learning. The creative development and expression of humor in the classroom deals with "how" to teach, not "what" to teach. The use of humor should be a teaching tool that, if effective, will increase the amount of "what" is taught that is actually learned by students. Using humor can have very definite positive effects in this regard for the following reasons:

- (1) The use of humor in the classroom can help to create a more positive learning environment by breaking down barriers to communication between the professor and the students (which are also barriers to learning) (Hill, 1998; Berk, 1998). There are many differences between professors and students such as position, title, age, and income that create natural barriers to communication and learning that



must be broken down by teachers if they are to be effective (Berk, 1998). Humor is one method by which professors can make their relationships with students closer. "When teachers have a sense of humor and aren't afraid to use it, students relax and become listeners. Having a sense of humor is an indication that the teacher is human and can share with the group" (Hill, 1998). Humor builds rapport between the students and teacher. Students will be less intimidated and less inhibited about asking questions or making comments. Barbara Walters, tv commentator, reported one of the most likable qualities of the late Princess Diana was her 'disarming' sense of humor. Joan Rivers, comedian, once said that humor creates a bond between people: My student survey results confirm this (Table 1, Part A, #5). A teacher who makes mistakes and is willing to admit it or laugh at himself/herself when this happens communicates to students that it is also okay for them to be creative, take chances, look at things in an offbeat way, and perhaps, even make mistakes in the process. Goodman (1995) states that humor and creativity are related, that there is a connection between Ha Ha and Aha.

(2) Humor can help students retain subject matter, especially if the humor reinforces the class material (Hill, 1998). My own surveys of students indicate that they tend to agree that they are more likely to remember material if it is presented with humor (Table 1, Part A, #3). There are common sense reasons that I have witnessed for believing that the use of humor helps students learn. The main reason is that the use of humor helps to gain students' attention and keep their interest in the material being presented. Students whom I surveyed tended to agree with this assertion (Table 1, Part A, #11). Also, it is physically impossible to laugh and snore at the same time (Berk, 1998).

(3) The use of humor may give students a reason (hopefully another reason) to attend class (Berk, 1998). Students whom I have surveyed say they are more likely to attend classes where humor is used and more likely to skip boring classes (Table 1, Part A, #1 and #9). Devadoss and Foltz (1996) report a strong positive correlation between class attendance and student performance which supports findings of earlier studies (Romer, 1993, White, 1992). While no substitute for substance, humor can create a more positive, fun, interesting environment that promotes class attendance and student learning.

(4) Other reported benefits of humor in the classroom (Berk, 1998; Hill, 1998) include increased comprehension and cognitive retention (presumably due to less stress and anxiety), reduced student negativism or hostility regarding potentially confrontational issues (e.g. grading) in the classroom, as well as improved student attitudes toward the

subject and the instructor. Recent research (Berk, 1996), reports that students consistently evaluated humor strategies as effective at reducing their anxiety, improving their ability to learn, and helping them to do their best.

A photo survey of six students in our school's student newspaper during the fall 1997 semester asked students, 'Who is your favorite professor?' Student comments on three of the six identified professors included 'presents material with a good sense of humor', 'makes the class interesting; not dull and boring', and 'really funny and keeps my attention'. Student comments taken from course evaluation forms for my Intermediate Microeconomic Theory course during the last two fall semesters included 'humor has been good for a 9:00 class', 'almost fun; maybe it shouldn't be', 'you try to make the material interesting, even though it's not', 'I liked the jokes; although the class was very difficult, you kept me interested enough to come to class every day', and 'the instructor was nice and funny which made the class relax for a better learning environment'. Former New York governor Alfred E. Smith is quoted to have said "If you can make people laugh, you can make them think, and make them like and believe you". He was presumably giving this advice to public speakers. Not bad advice for instructors, either.

(5) One final benefit I will suggest, primarily from the instructor's perspective, is that an instructor who effectively prepares and uses humor in the classroom will find that teaching is more fun and enjoyable. Trying to achieve excellence in how to teach, whether it be with humor or with something else, requires creativity and can bring some of the challenge back to teaching for those who may have lost it because they have mastered the what to teach. Watching students who seem to be enjoying listening to you and hearing them laugh at your humor is very rewarding.

### Humor and Telling Jokes in the Classroom

Telling jokes is only one way, and probably the most explicit way, to interject humor into a classroom. If you are a professor like me, you are not trained to be a comedian and you may not regard yourself as a very good teller of jokes. Hence, jokes are a fairly high-risk form of humor where the risk relates to the chances of "bombing," or "dying," or not coming off as funny, in front of students and having to deal with all of the accompanying embarrassment and humiliation. One should probably keep in mind that the end result of bombing, total silence, may be the same as if no



attempt had been made to use humor at all. A professor who can't tell a joke, should still consider using humor for the following reasons:

(1) Students don't expect the professor to be a comedian or a clown. They expect the professor to be a teacher and an educator first. Although students like a professor to be funny (Table 1, Part A #6 and #7), being an entertainer by using humor to make classes more fun or interesting ranks behind about seven other qualities or traits of instructors in terms of importance for students I have surveyed (Table 1, Part B; Table 1, Part A, #10).

(2) The relatively low overall student ranking of humor should not be interpreted to cast doubt on the importance of humor as a teaching tool. While students may not expect or require a professor to be funny, they likely prefer professors who show that they have a sense of humor over professors who either don't have a sense of humor or don't show it. Trying to be funny, even though one is not, indicates that person at least has a sense of humor. Students I surveyed tended to agree that they would rather have an instructor try to be humorous and fail rather than not try to be humorous at all (Table 1, Part A, #7). These same students also believed that the use of humor is not a waste of classroom time and that they tended to have a better sense of humor than most of their instructors (Table 1, Part A, #2 and #4). Maybe a bad joke is better than no joke at all. Student comments on instructor evaluations like "good use of humor," "funny," "keep up the jokes," "relaxed atmosphere," "fun class," etc. should be further evidence of students' appreciation of instructor use (or at least attempted use) of humor. Berk (1996) states that while students likely prefer professorial competence to jocularity skills, they would most like a combination of the two.

(3) Recovering from a joke that bombed with a quick humorous quip may, in itself, add some humor and reduce audience tension in the classroom. Some of my best experiences with humor in the classroom have been of this spontaneous, unrehearsed, unanticipated variety. Observe recovery techniques that Leno and Letterman use after one of their jokes bombs. Having had some practice with bombed attempts at humor, I have developed a few comeback quips of my own like, "my secretary told me this wasn't funny; I guess she was right," or "I found that to be funny and amusing, but I'm obviously a party of one". Pretending nothing happened and continuing to talk is another acceptable on-the-spot recovery strategy. Unacceptable recovery attempts include trying to explain the joke as well as complaining to the students or criticizing them for not laughing (Berk, 1998).

## Ten Non-joke Examples of Humor

There are several other forms of humor, often more implicit or subtle than jokes, that often have lower bomb risk associated with them that I have used in the classroom with at least some success. Additional forms, types, or sources of humor for use in the classroom include those listed below. Just a reminder that the specific examples cited will work best if used in relationship with class subject matter.

(1) Quotes. Quotes of famous people, yourself, students, etc. often provide one of the simplest ways to introduce humor into a lecture. They typically are easy to find. Putting the quote on a visual and trying to say something funny about it usually adds to its impact.

Original example: When economists are asked to forecast, they respond not because they know, but because they are asked (John Galbraith, Economist).

Twisted example: He or she who laughs last, thinks the slowest.

Original followed by a related make-up-your own example:

Trying to forecast the economy in the '80s is a bit like having sex in your 80s. It's exciting but potentially terminal (Alan Abelson, Editor, *Barons*, 1989).

Trying to accurately forecast futures markets in the '90s is a bit like trying to have sex in your 90s. You can't do it all the time (Ron Deiter).

Student quote: "I understand the questions on your exam, it's the answers that I don't understand."

"This material looks so easy when you do it in class, but when I try it at home it blows up in my face."

(2) Cartoons. Like quotes, cartoons are easy to find (newspapers, magazines, etc.) easy to use (make enlarged overhead), and fairly self explanatory.



Original example:



Slightly altered original:



Dr. Deiter's REAL Grading Method

Original followed by a related make-up-your-own example:



(3) Multiple-choice items. Because everyone has taken multiple-choice tests, students can easily relate to them. Usually, the format is to make the question the serious element that builds the anticipation and leads to the punch line or punch lines. The following is an example that I presented to my class following up on an article in our daily campus paper regarding whether or not students should be allowed to buy professor's notes from a professional note taker. While most students seemed to find this somewhat funny, the biggest humorous response occurred when one student suggested that the 'best' answer should be 'f', 'all of the above'.

#### 90% of What Professors Say in Their Lectures

- are known facts or ideas that don't belong to anyone
- comes straight out of the textbook
- is SUPER boring, the rest is just boring
- has nothing to do with anything that goes on in the real world
- students know already

(4) Top 10 lists. These lists have become a widely used form of humor in presentations having been popularized by David Letterman. A top 5 list will also work and saves time, not to mention you only have to come up with half as many funny items. Developing your own Letterman-like introduction to the list is recommended as is revealing items on the list one at a time in ascending order of importance (or funniness?) while pausing somewhat to build tension, especially before revealing and reading the number one item on the list.

#### Top 5 Reasons Why Studying (Class) is Better than Sex

- If you get tired you can stop, take a break, and pick up where you left off later.
- You can usually find someone to do it with.
- You don't get embarrassed if your parents catch you doing it.
- You don't have to put your drink down to do it.
- If you aren't sure what you're doing, you can always ask your roommate for help.



(5) Current event items (e.g. newspaper articles, campus news, world headlines, personal anecdotes, etc.). Taking time to share these items with students and to point out with a little exaggeration perhaps what it is about them that you find absurd, ridiculous, illogical, etc. (i.e. humorous) can be an effective way for a professor to show students that he/she has a sense of humor. For example, I once came across a *Wall Street Journal* article that reported the results of a research study that found "Obese men and women and heavy drinkers and drug users were significantly less likely to get married." Instructor comments like "Isn't it amazing how enlightening modern research can be?" or "Tell us something we don't already know, right?" will usually produce a chuckle or two from students.

Professors can also show an original article to the class and then follow it up with a related article that the professor has expanded or revised slightly. For example, I once showed students an overhead of a campus newspaper article that discussed a new university policy whereby "Teachers must warn students of explicit 'course content'". I changed the word explicit to boring for a second overhead and I used it to talk about another policy that I thought was needed more. A professor, like Jay Leno, can also look for and use examples of newspaper articles that contain funny errors or humorous wordings if interpreted literally. While finding articles or other humorous items that directly relate to class topics is desirable, it may not always be possible, nor is it essential. Opening class with humorous but not-class-related material still serves to motivate students to be on time to hear it, to reduce the students' stress level coming into the class, to trigger a fun attitude, and to once again show students that the professor does indeed have a sense of humor (Berk, 1998).

(6) Definitions. Providing humorous definitions of topics related to a professor's class can be a simple yet effective and relatively low risk form of humor. For example:

Inflation - a process that allows you to live in a more expensive neighborhood without having had to go through the trouble of moving.

(7) Professor responses to students' questions or to things that go awry during the lecture can be a source of humor in the classroom. Examples of possible humorous responses to:

a) professor makes a mistake:

"I was just checking to see if anyone was paying attention," or "Isn't it nice of me to show you some

common mistakes so you can avoid making them on the exam."

b) professor garbles or slurs a sentence, misspeaks, etc.:

"Easy for me to say, huh?", or "Does anyone care to interpret what I just said,"

c) overhead projector light burns out:

"Anyone have a spare projector bulb on them?," or "Can anyone explain to me why this university is noted for science and technology?"

(8) Asking simple questions of students where at least one is a humorous question can also be an effective, easy way to get humor into a classroom presentation.

Example:

- 1) How many of you agree with this statement?
- 2) How many of you disagree with this statement?
- 3) How many of you have no opinion on this statement?
- 4) How many of you would rather go home and go back to bed?

(9) Self-effacing comments are probably the most convenient, safe, and non-offensive form of humor. Making fun of yourself, your accomplishments, your material, your luck, your job, your personal life, etc. lets your students know that you are human, real, approachable, not arrogant, and not superior to them. Revealing your faults and weaknesses gives students a feeling of comfort in knowing that maybe you're not perfect and so they're not expected to be either. Poking fun of yourself increases rather than decreases students' respect for you. Comedians like Rodney Dangerfield and Woody Allen have built their routines around this form of humor.

For example, when the material seems to be getting a little dry, I've sometimes tried to liven things up with a comment like "looks like I'm living up to the definition of a professor with this stuff; a professor has been defined as someone who talks in someone else's sleep". Sometimes a simple exaggerated comment like "Gee isn't this interesting material. I can see by the look on your faces that many of you are saying 'tell me more!' Of course, then again, maybe I need to have my eyesight checked".



(10) Including humorous written comments on any handout given to students can also be an effective way of using humor in the college classroom. For example, on the course syllabus, humorous material can be incorporated into such items as the course title, course prerequisites, instructor title or credentials, and instructor office hours (Berk, 1998). Quotes, warnings, cautions, unusual instructions are examples of humorous material that can be added to handouts, including quizzes and exams. I put the following quote of myself at the top of a recent exam that prompted several student smiles - "Your brain is an amazing thing. It starts working the minute you get up in the morning and doesn't stop working until you get to class." A humorous part of my instructions for a recent exam included "Remember, this is only a TEST; if it were a real emergency, you wouldn't be sitting here." Using funny names, funny examples, or ludicrous possible choices for a multiple choice question are other ways to use humor in a nonverbal way on test days.

### Summary and Conclusions

The use of humor in the classroom can be a very effective teaching tool but only if it is appropriate and nonoffensive. Humor that should be avoided because of its potentially offensive nature include put-downs of any specific individual (perhaps other than yourself), put-downs of any specific group (based on nationality, race, religion, etc.), sexual content or innuendo, profanity/vulgarity, and humor about sensitive issues (Berk, 1998). Testing material out in advance on friends, colleagues, and family members can help to detect potentially offensive material before it is used. Students I surveyed did not report a problem with having been offended by the use of humor (Table 1, Part A, #8). However, professors still need to be sensitive to this issue. While there is always a place for in-class, spontaneous, on-the-spot witticisms, I believe if humor is to be used most effectively as a presentation tool, it has to be well-planned and well-thought out. Spend some time before each class actually thinking about humorous material that you might be able to use. Be a student of humor. Learn from others. Select types of humor that you are comfortable with. Start a humor file. Sources of humorous material of the kinds noted above include newspapers (including the *Wall Street Journal*), magazines, books, radio and tv shows, humor journals and newsletters, the internet, as well as other people. Practice your delivery of humorous material. Even then, be prepared for some bombs, but don't give up easily. Humorous material need not only be used in lectures. It can be used on problem sets, exams, course administration handouts, etc.

There are various degrees of laughter ranging from

one who smirks to one who dies laughing. The response of students to my use of humor is typically not a lot of convulsive laughter from the upper end of the laughing spectrum. A smirk, a smile, a grin, or maybe a snicker is often the only visible sign that students are responding to my use of humor.

Using humor in the classroom in an appropriate manner should not be viewed as demeaning to the professoriate or the profession. In fact, using humor can be used to increase an instructor's credibility, likability, professional image, and perhaps most importantly, teaching effectiveness. Teaching is serious business, but there is a big difference between being serious and being solemn. One can be discussing something very serious and be funny or laughing at the same time. The use of humor should not necessarily detract from the seriousness.

A so-called sense of humor counts as a virtue in our society (Norrick, 1993). It is often a desirable leadership quality or trait. Displaying a sense of humor in the classroom sends a signal to students that having a sense of humor is important. Deborah Hill (1988) suggests that this may be the most important thing we ever teach to students. "If teachers can teach a student to have a sense of humor about the very serious things in life, they are teaching much more than facts and figures. By teaching students to be able to laugh at themselves, teachers are showing students how to cope in the real world which is one of the most important survival skills we have" (Hill, 1988).

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