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"Last Professor Standing!": PowerPoint Enables All Faculty to Use Humor in Teaching

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Introduction

Humor? Are you kidding me? In a professional journal? Well, yeah. You can chuckle or chortle all the way to the scholarly journals on humor. There are more serious humor researchers than members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. And they take humor seriously, the researchers that is, not the choir. "So what's this article about? It's certainly not very funny so far."

Let's begin with an unscientific, statistically-biased, sloppy survey. Are you currently using humor in your teaching and/or presentations at professional conferences? Have you been considering it, but haven't taken the leap yet? Are you too scared and shaking in your Birkenstocks to try humor? Do you attempt humor with your urologist? If you answered "yes" to any of those questions, especially about your Birkenstocks, "come on down!" If you answered "no" and would like to add a new dimension to your teaching and shaking, stay on board. If you're already totally confused, that's fine. I am too.

Instructional Breakthrough

Guess what? If you always wanted to use humor, but didn't for any reason, now you can. This is YOUR time. There are two major global educational trends that have changed the form and execution of humor in the classroom and in professional conferences: (1) the burgeoning instructional technology, especially PowerPoint, which can provide a vehicle for several forms of low risk humor anyone can present, and (2) the diversity of classroom demographics, especially students with different nationalities, which restricts the use of culture-specific humor. The first trend now *permits anyone to present humor without saying a word*, much less a punchline. That means that any instructor, even one with the personality of a grapefruit, can deliver humor. You may not be able to land a job at Goldman Sachs, but

you can do this. The second trend draws a *line between culture-specific and culture-free humor*. Instructors need to be particularly sensitive to the cultural composition of their classroom in choosing appropriate humor.

What Humor Is NOT in the Classroom

Humor is NOT about telling jokes to your class, comedy, or "Last Professor Standing." Wow! Bummer. None of us is trained to perform, although some of you may be gifted with that comic gene or have theatre in your bone marrow or spleen. Ouch! *Humor is not a random act of entertainment* in the classroom. When humor is intended for teaching, it is a teaching tool that is systematically-planned and has a specific learning outcome.

The purposes of this groundbreaking article are: (1) to briefly review the research on humor and laughter, (2) to present a half dozen of the most effective techniques, (3) to suggest how and where to infuse humor throughout your PowerPoint, (4) to list 40 safe, culture-specific and culture-free content topics for humor, and (5) to proffer a few final thoughts.

Review of Research on Humor and Laughter

For you "doubting Rons" out there and others, there are buckets of humor research on the individual psychological, physiological, and educational benefits, and techniques in teaching, training, and speaking. There are also more than 350 research papers (Nilsen, n.d.). Most critical reviews of the research appeared within the last decade (Berk, 2001a, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, in press; Martin, 2001, 2003, 2006; McGhee, 1999, 2010; Provine, 2000). Those reviews furnish a somewhat sobering, realistic assessment of the evidence to pinpoint precisely what we know and what we don't know (but would like to know). I am ashamed to admit that

I contributed to the destruction of scores of trees and shrubbery by publishing a few studies on humor in the classroom (Berk, 1996, 2000, 2001b, 2002, 2004b; Berk & Nanda, 1998, 2006).

Humor in Teaching

So what could I possibly type in this article that you can't get elsewhere? How about an up-to-date summary of the specific effects of humor in teaching and the classroom environment? Consider the following dozen effects:

1. Improves overall mental functioning
2. Reduces the negative emotional consequence of stress, anxiety, and tension
3. Reduces test anxiety and improves performance
4. Enhances creativity
5. Facilitates communication
6. Arouses attention and engagement
7. Improves understanding, retention, and memory
8. Improves problem-solving
9. Relaxes students
10. Encourages open-mindedness
11. Increases instructor-student rapport
12. Facilitates a positive mood and cooperative classroom atmosphere

Humor in Multimedia

In addition to these benefits, when multimedia (images, music, videos) are used as the vehicle for the humor, there are several other effects. Humorous pictures, graphs, charts, diagrams, and a variety of graphic designs can stimulate emotional reactions and *increase attention and retention of content* more than words alone (Lane & Wright, 2011). Animated visuals and infographics can *enhance learning* significantly more than static visuals (Höffler & Leutner, 2007; Tversky, Morrison, & Betrancourt, 2002; Yu & Smith, 2008).

Humorous music and sound effects elicit emotional reactions, set tone or mood, and engage nearly every area of the brain by involving almost every neural subsystem (Berk, 2008, 2011), including the *release of the neurochemical dopamine* which sends "feel good" signals to the rest of the body (Salimpoor, Benovoy, Larcher, Dagher, & Zatorre, 2011). Instructionally, a catchy melody and fast, up-tempo, major-key music can activate sensory functions that create the emotional connection to excite and snap your students to *attention and sustain attention*, while slipping the content into *long-term memory.*

Humorous multimedia (auditory/verbal and visual/pictorial stimuli) can *increase memory, comprehension, understanding, and deep learning* more than any single stimulus by itself (Kirschner, Kester, & Corbalan, 2011). My reviews of the research on cognitive load, working memory, and dual-coding theories (Berk, 2009b, 2011) indicated that multimedia learning *promotes skill acquisition, retention, and transfer (application) of information* (Mayer, 2009; Mayer & Johnson, 2008).

Six Most Effective Humor Techniques

Among more than 20 planned (as opposed to spontaneous) humor techniques you could include in your teaching (Berk, 2002, 2003, 2009c; Morrison, 2012), there are three verbal and three multimedia forms that (a) have ginormous potential for laughs, and (b) permit a connection to course content. These six forms are particularly effective with serious, boring, gag-in-the-throat topics, as perceived by many of our Net Gener (aka Millennial) students and a few faculty. You can insert content into these forms or select forms containing content related to the topic.

The six techniques are: (1) anecdotes, (2) multiple-choice format, (3) top 10 list, (4) visual images, (5) music and sound effects, and (6) videos. They can be applied to any face-to-face (f2f), online, or blended class or a deadly conference presentation. Brief descriptions of each form follow.

Anecdotes

Stories are a widely used vehicle for humor and, in academia, they're the most common form. They are a lower risk than formal jokes because they usually don't have a set punchline. They should be short and focused, without more twists and turns than your small intestine. As your story naturally unfolds, you can embellish your description of the actual event each time you tell it. It should get funnier and funnier unless you're a bad embellisher or have a twisted intestine.

You can draw from two main sources: (1) professional experiences, and (2) personal events. Humorous *professional experiences* in your career can be described as stories related to the point you're trying to make. Also consider telling *true personal stories* about yourself, your family (with their permission), and friends that may have a humorous spin. Students love to hear about our personal lives, because many of them believe that we do not have any. Those stories connect with your students emotionally and can be as effective as a stand-up joke to snap them to attention or illustrate a concept.

Multiple-Choice Format

This format contains four or five punchlines as the choices in a multiple-choice joke. Create a serious "stem" question or incomplete sentence format, followed by the

choices. Everyone knows multiple-choice. Instead of the "negative" image of a test item, it is a vehicle for something positive. Try to use actual content or information to emphasize a concept or process.

Top 10 List

Letterman's ubiquitous "Top 10" can be used on any topic where you can generate 10 punchlines. It's a list of one-liners. Remember to put your best punches at the end as you count down to 1. It can be most effective in teaching when the 10 lines are parodies of actual content you want your students to learn.

READER ALERT: The preceding two techniques can be easily executed with PowerPoint (PPT) using line animation, where each punch is revealed incrementally as it is being read. An instructor who is a firehose of charisma can handle these verbal techniques. The next three illustrate the significant contribution that PPT can make where no verbal skill or oral joke delivery is required. *The constraints of verbal humor have been rendered obsolete by PPT.* Images, music and sound effects, and videos make humor accessible to all instructors, even grapefruitboy. These media can be presented seamlessly in any PPT without uttering a word. You have no lines to memorize. The media can be embedded in your PPT slides and infused throughout any presentation to elicit laughter and increase skill acquisition, comprehension, understanding, retention, memory, and deep learning. It's never been so easy to provide the illusion that you are really funny until now. If you can pick the right media and click your slides, your students or audience will laugh their guts out and then exit thinking you are hilarious, and you didn't tell a single joke. You're just a clicker, not a comedian. *WE NOW RESUME THIS SECTION ALREADY IN PROGRESS.*

Visual Images

Humorous images from Creative Commons, Flickr, Facebook page and LinkedIn update posts, and other online sources are available on most every topic for free. Still and animated images with appropriate music can have a stronger humor impact than the images alone.

Music and Sound Effects

Sound effects alone or strategically-placed lyrics can induce laughter. Music with a still or animated image can magnify its humorous impact.

Videos

A short video clip of a commercial, humorous situation, or movie excerpt can be a powerful moment in your presentation. It can be visually dazzling, entertain-ing, and packed with content to make your point. Your students may never forget it. Select from millions of clips on YouTube or create your own. Embed a crisply edited clip or stream in the video. Make sure every embedded clip is converted to Windows Media Video (WMV) format and you have downloaded the Microsoft Windows Codec Pack on your PC so the videos will play.

How and Where to Infuse Humor throughout Your PowerPoint

So now what are you supposed to do with those six techniques? This heading suggests multiple injections or an IV drip. That might work, but we can also do it by carefully calculating the *critical points in your presentation when humor can serve a specific instructional purpose*, such as exaggerate a concept to make sure it sticks, engage students in a humorous illustration, or summarize key points with humorous triggers. Consider multiple doses of humor when your students least expect them, but don't overstuff your PPT. The element of surprise is crucial to their success and yours.

How much humor can you shoehorn into your classroom PPT? Let's apply the six techniques to your PPT presentation. First, make sure to complete a draft of your "serious" presentation in PPT slides. That's the content and message you want to communicate. The *humor is an add-on*. It will punch-up your message so it will be engaging, fun, memorable, and, maybe, unforgettable.

Now you're ready to insert the humor. Here are a few suggestions on how and where to plug in those humor slides:

Opening

You want to start off with a bang to set the tone for your presentation, grab your students' attention, and create an emotional, personal connection with your class or audience. It should move them to the edges of their seats in anticipation of what you will do next.

Plan to begin class with a sure-fire *anecdote* (moderate risk), *stand-up joke* (high risk), or provocative, humorous *video* (low risk). Pick the form of humor that best fits your style and the content you're presenting.

Prepare thoroughly to make sure you nail the opening. For the video, begin with a complete room blackout to build tension. Then play the video in your PPT. Embedded mode is clearer and more dependable because the image is clean, without the YouTube shell, and doesn't require buffering.

DO NOT use humor only at the opening and then bore your students to tears and then death for the rest of your presentation. You've experienced that effect with so many of your colleagues. (*NOTE:* I'm still crying from

a presentation I saw recently.) That makes no sense. Instead, seriously consider…

Infusing Humor throughout Your PPT

Scan your presentation outline, storyboard, or serious slide deck for areas where humor can be used to illustrate, embellish, or provide content. Your task is to find the "humor sweet spots," where they can be most effective. Bookmark those areas. Also, as you rehearse your slides, try to think like your students. At what points in your PPT would their eyeballs glaze over or pop out of their sockets and dangle down to their knees from the optic nerves? Where do they need a jolt of humor? Then determine the most appropriate forms of humor for each point. With diverse nationalities or generations in your class, try to select *visual humor*.

Humorous *images* (low risk) with verbal narration and animation or *music* (low risk) can have a strong impact and are extremely effective. *Videos* (low risk) are even better. Add as many media elements as your imagination will produce. You can always cutback in the final editing.

Commercial Breaks

We are interrupted constantly by commercials. Everybody is selling something. At key break-points in your presentation where you may need to reel in your students from Lalaland, insert humorous commercial breaks, between one and three, depending on the length of your class. One is adequate for 50-, 60-, and 90-minute classes; two or three breaks are needed for three-hours or longer. These may be any of the six humor forms or other forms. Make sure every break is different. Here are some suggestions.

Multiple-choice (high risk) and *top 10* (high risk) formats can derail the flow of the presentation, grab wandering minds, snap everyone to attention, induce laughter as a release value, and refocus eyeballs, including those still dangling, and minds on the content being presented. Even more tantalizing is an *image* or *video*, for which you need to prepare lead-in set-up lines for the break. Either medium can be visually arresting and sneakily engrossing.

Closing

You want a big, positive, memorable finale to class other than "Dismissed," "See you Wednesday," "Pull up your pants," or "Have a good life!" It's the students' last impression of you that day and the content. Your wrap-up could be in *multiple-choice* or *top 10* format with a punchline or two at the end of the serious content choice summary. A humorous *image* or *video* could also be the final punch. It's your soaring final moments. Let your imagination explode and consider the possibilities for a spectacular ending that your students will be texting to their buddies in their next class.

Top 40 Safe, Content Topics for Culture-Specific and Culture-Free Humor

How do you decide on what content to use in your humor? It's like figuring out what to say to impress your first eHarmony date between the appetizer and entrée at Olive Garden Italian Restaurant. You really don't want to offend.

Offensive Humor

Among the humor flotsam and jetsam floating through the congested humorsphere of the media and Internet, begin by considering the *types of humor to avoid which could be offensive* to any student or member of your audience. Our hero previously identified and described seven categories of offensive humor: (1) put-downs, (2) sarcasm, (3) ridicule, (4) profanity, (5) vulgarity, (6) sexual content and innuendo, and (7) sensitive personal experiences (Berk, 2009a, 2009c, 2014). They are inappropriate in the classroom and professional presentations and apply to all forms of verbal humor, humorous images, music lyrics and sound effects, and humorous video commercials, comedy movie clips, and other videos.

Those categories probably blow to smithereens virtually every form of humor you've ever heard or seen. "What else is there?" I'm so glad you asked; otherwise this section would be reduced to a big fat blank.

So what topics are safe, nonoffensive domains for humor material? As you noticed in my categories, most of the violations involve attacks on people and their characteristics. You hear that "humor" in sitcoms, Comedy Central, and comedy movies. Instead of taking the low road, consider the high road in your classroom. Steer clear of personal jokes and examples, unless they are positive and complimentary. Remember: *The goal is to use humor to build people up*, not tear them down.

There are three domains of nonoffensive humor content you might consider: (1) professional humor topics, (2) culture-specific humor, and (3) culture-free or generic humor. Think about these topics in the context of what you teach and your students.

Professional Humor Topics

Professional humor topics that would be appropriate in presentations might include

- PowerPoint
- Technology & network issues
- Departmental policies & procedures
- Rules & regulations
- Teaching practices & resources
- Faculty development activities
- Professional conferences

Parodies or jokes about the above should focus on the problems or issues, not the people involved. Use your best judgment in what you pick. When in doubt, DON'T USE IT! Do your homework on your students' characteristics or the institution who hired you to speak or conference audience. Investigate sensitive problem areas and hot button issues that would be inappropriate. Find out what recent events have occurred that may or may not be appropriate in your humor as the butt of a joke.

Culture-Specific Humor

This domain draws on material from the following:
- TV programs
- Commercials
- Infomercials
- Movies
- Music videos
- Musicals and plays

The products and services advertised everywhere in the country of origin and familiar brand names of everything fit into this category. Images and videos from the sources previously mentioned provide an enormous pool of international humor material.

Most of the humor material we see everywhere is culture-specific. If an alien from the planet Mars or Snickers visited us and watched our sitcoms or attended your class, he or she probably wouldn't laugh very much. That's because aliens don't have a sense of humor. WROONG! I'm told they have a terrific sense of humor; they just don't understand our culture. And they're not the only ones.

That would also be the case for students enrolled in your course who come from different countries or cultures. Their cultural backgrounds may indicate an appreciation of forms of humor different from yours and they may react to those forms differently. Unless the students are immersed in the instructor's culture, it would be difficult to truly understand his or her humor. For example, except for several TV sitcoms we have adapted from the Brit's originals (broadcast on PBS or BRAVO), most of our humor on TV and in the movies is veeerry American.

How does this observation affect the humor you choose for your class? I have discovered that the *form of the humor,* such as anecdote, multiple-choice joke, top 10, visual image, or video, is not as significant a factor as the *content* with students from countries outside of the U.S. Further, international students from certain countries may react differently to your humor. They may not laugh, at least not the way you expect. In fact, there may be little or no laughter. Some cultures suppress laughter; people do not feel free to express themselves emotionally through laughter. As an instructor, you need to be sensitive to these characteristics.

Culture-Free or Generic Humor

In contrast to the previous domain, culture-free humor is based on universal, common core, generic topics that are not specific to any culture, country, or planet. There are four topics: (1) common core, (2) relationships, (3) music, and (4) videos. The humor should focus on the basic characteristics and ingredients with which everyone can connect. Here are a few examples:

1. Common Core
- Animals, especially pets
- Airlines
- Other travel (trains, subways, cars, etc.)
- Coffee/tea
- Food
- Diets
- Medical care
- Weather
- Sports
- Cell phones
- Technology

2. Relationships
- Marriage
- Dating
- Being a parent
- Babies & infants
- Living with teenagers
- Being young (Net Geners)
- Getting old (Boomers & Traditionalists)
- Net Geners moving back home
- Generational similarities & differences
- Boss-employee

3. Music
- Songs by internationally known artists
- Mega-hit & Oscar-winning movie themes
- Musicals on international tours

4. Videos

- TV commercials (with universal message or joke)
- "America's Funniest Home Videos"
- Comedy movie clips

With the increasing diversity of students in our classes and faculty in our conferences, language and cultural differences are a significant concern in choosing humor content. Your priority humor forms should be *images and videos*, not verbal jokes. Search the preceding topics on Creative Commons and YouTube for Dumpsters of visual material with which all students can relate. *The success of your humor with students hinges on how carefully you select the right stuff or write material that is universally understood.*

Finally, *avoid jargon, slang, street language, and idioms* in your humor that can be uninterpretable or misinterpreted (and, possibly offensive). That type of language has become so pervasive in our culture that sometimes it's hard to discern the real meaning of the message.

A Few Final Thoughts on Humor

After wading through this bloated treatise on the latest strategies for integrating humor into PowerPoint, you're probably on the verge of snoring, throwing up, or screaming at me. Here are a few final thoughts. Please hold your sickness bag and screams until the end.

Humorous Visual Images and Video Clips

As you review your serious PPT slide deck for specific locations to insert humor, *concentrate on visual images and videos*. They can have a strong impact with any audience because they transcend cultural and generational differences between people. Interestingly, some of the most effective verbal humor consists of words that create jocular images in your mind, such as: "A major cause of death of professional fashion models is falling through street grates" (Dave Barry). Images and videos also have a much lower risk or no risk compared to the verbal techniques.

Self-Downs

Beyond all of the previous 40 topics, consider yourself as the butt of jokes in your class. Self-effacing, self-deprecating humor can be extremely effective to break down barriers between you and your students. For visuals of you, take humorous selfie images and videos and pick JibJab videos for all holidays and other occasions in which you can insert photos of you and your students. Self-downs provide an infinite source of humor material.

Humor Peer Review

Make sure to have your humor slides reviewed by at least one or two colleagues to test them for funniness and possible offensiveness. Don't skip this step. That review can be critical to your success.

Practice Your Humor

Practice the delivery of your humor with your PPT slides. All forms of humor you use should be tautly orchestrated throughout your presentation. Multiple-choice and top 10 formats require precise timing for the animation of each punchline. Images, music, and videos embedded in your slides should be executed glitch free, appear effortless, and flow seamlessly in the course of your PPT production. You can never practice or rehearse enough.

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