

Humor in the Learning Environment: Increasing Interaction, Reducing Discipline Problems, and Speeding Time

~Duke R. Kelly

Introduction

Many societal factors play a role in how *connected* people, especially children, feel toward each other. We live in a digital age where online, electronic relationships are increasing and many students spend an increasing number of hours in front of the computer, video game system, or television. These activities, often enjoyed by children, do not readily promote direct human contact to the level that "pre-electronic" play often did. Person to person contact has the potential of taking on a more formal, less social, role, as in many work environments, even in a school environment. This decreased level of personal contact could be a contributing factor to at least one problem observed in many school settings: A decreased level of interaction between the students and teacher and between the students themselves.

This *connection* between the people in the classroom is important to learning. By *connection*, I mean students feel comfortable in the learning environment. Comfortable to participate in class discussions, create friendships, ask questions, and take risks. Without these qualities and levels of comfort, students face barriers to their learning. For students to interact with the teacher and expand their knowledge, they must feel a *connection* to the class so they can ask questions, make inquiries, etc. This paper is the result of a study exploring the use of a tool that has the potential to increase feelings of *connectedness* in a school setting. During the implementation of this tool, students reported, among other things, making new friends, asking more questions, quicker class periods, and an increased respect for the teacher. The teacher involved in this study reported increased participation, a decrease in discipline problems, and increased, positive out-of-class interaction with students.

The tool implemented during this study was the use of *humor* in the learning environment. To some, the use of humor may seem awkward or even inappropriate in a "serious" learning environment and its implementation may not be easy. This is normal according to Caine & Caine who say, "The dance between letting go of old beliefs and taking on a new way of thinking and perceiving is delicate and complex" (Caine & Caine, 1995, p. 47). This study shows, however,

that the use of humor in the classroom not only benefits the students, but the teacher as well. Learning should be, "an enjoyable, challenging, and, yes, entertaining activity just like learning a video game is" (Tapscott, 1998, 147).

Context

The teacher in this study, Mr. Chandler, teaches American History to freshman in a suburban school district in Michigan. A pool of teachers was interviewed for potential participation in this study. Mr. Chandler was asked to participate because the use of humor would seem to contrast with his usual style of teaching. This is not to say that Mr. Chandler is dry or boring. He is very passionate about his subject and that comes through to his students and colleagues. His preferred mode of instruction involves lecture, assigned reading, and the answering of questions. The class periods are 55 minutes in length and the class involved in this study occurred immediately prior to the lunch period.

Mr. Chandler reported some difficulties getting students involved in discussion. Even during group times, he said students rarely interacted with students with whom they were not close friends. He welcomed the chance to participate in a study that would provide him with some materials with which to experiment creating the type of environment he wanted in the classroom. The study continued in Mr. Chandler's class for nearly four weeks.

Why Humor?

When you think back to some of your favorite teachers from school, what qualities did they have? There are several qualities in an excellent teacher and responses to this question vary greatly. Some may say, for instance, that, "she was tough, but fair", "he believed in me", "he helped me through a difficult time", or "she cared about her students". I asked this question to several friends and colleagues and those responses were common, but one stood out as the most frequent, "they were funny". I, too, give "funny" as part of the response to this question. In conjunction with all of the other qualities of a good teacher, my favorites were those who had a sense of humor. A sense of humor about life, themselves, and the subject matter. Why, after all this time, do people still remember, and feel a lasting connection with, people from their past who used humor? It seems humor is a powerful tool for many people and this researcher chose to use it as the subject of this study to examine the specific effects of the use of humor in the learning environment.

Mr. Chandler was asked to insert humor into the learning environment at least three times during each meeting of his third hour class. These purposeful insertions of humor were abrupt, succinct and distinct from any additional humor present in his lectures and activities. These three instances were spread, as evenly as logistically possible, throughout the class period. After about fifteen minutes had lapsed, Mr. Chandler would pause the class and say something to the effect of, "Please pause where you are, I have something I would like to share with you...". He would then use humor for the class. Often, he would simply read something he considered funny, a cartoon, a joke, a short story, or a quote from someone famous. Mr. Chandler was provided with several sheets filled with such humorous anecdotes, jokes, stories, quips, and quotes. After a very brief reading and reaction from the students, Mr. Chandler would simply ask the students to return to their previous task.

Teacher Reaction and Perspective

At first, Mr. Chandler noted that these abrupt insertions felt awkward stating, "there were no natural points to use it". He also commented that it felt as if these insertions would be a waste of time. This "waste of time", he feared, would interfere with the amount of content that needed to be covered during the period of the study. To his credit, Mr. Chandler stayed with the regimen. The students were not informed in advance that this change would be taking place. They noticed immediately, however, since stopping a lecture was out of character for Mr. Chandler. Within two class periods, he observed a change in the students of the class. When he would pause the current activity, students would sit up straighter, focus on him, and become quiet. During these times, the students would begin to cease their doodling, chatting, and head nodding. "It seems the students were looking forward to the humor after only two or three periods." Initially, Mr. Chandler said that it took a "minute or two" to get the class settled down after a particularly popular, or particularly unpopular reading. After the routine was established, however, the return to the task was nearly immediate. Mr. Chandler found he did not have to omit any of his planned content because the reading took up such a small portion of the period. He also noticed that the students seemed more closely focused in the time immediately following a piece of humor. He was able to quickly adjust his plans and explain key points at these crucial times of increased attention. A byproduct of these "required" insertions was that Mr. Chandler was forced to find ways to break up his planned lecture into smaller chunks.

The insertion of these humorous points also had an effect on the environment in and outside of the classroom. By the end of the first full week, students began to ask if they could read or share something humorous during the “laugh stops” as they affectionately became called. Although not part of the study, Mr. Chandler welcomed this volunteer interaction in the class (after previewing the content, of course). The teacher said the students did not always break into laughter at the conclusion of a humor stop, but there always *was* a reaction of some type. By the middle of the second week of the study, Mr. Chandler began to see a noticeable increase in the number of hands raised to ask or answer a question, or simply make an unsolicited comment. There was also a noticeable increase in the number of students who would linger after class for a quick, “goodbye” or “have a good day” with each other and the teacher. Mr. Chandler noticed an increasing number of students who would catch his eye in the hallway to say hello or wave.

Whether perceived or not, Mr. Chandler also commented that he had to issue fewer comments along the lines of, “please stop talking” and “please keep on task”. This decrease in time spent on classroom management could be the factor that makes up for the time spent exercising the use of humor.

Mr. Chandler plans to continue the use of humor in the classroom, but perhaps at a different level. During this study, Mr. Chandler was provided with several sheets and sources of humor to include. Mr. Chandler expressed that it may be difficult to continue the use of purposeful humor without being supplied and directed to new sources of humor. This was, however, the *only* factor causing him to rethink the frequency of use. It was clear that the increased level of participation and interaction in the classroom was worth the effort to Mr. Chandler.

Student Reaction and Perspective

Many students in the classroom also commented, upon being interviewed, that class had seemed to go by more quickly. Nearly half of the students explicitly stated that they began to use Mr. Chandler’s class as a sort of “measure” for other classes. Not only did Mr. Chandler’s class seem shorter, the students’ other classes seemed longer. Several students noticed themselves discussing topics from this class on a more frequent basis. These outside-of-class conversations were sometimes about the content and sometimes about the specific humor used in the class. One student told a story of walking into the cafeteria and being called over to a table with the question, “did you think that story was funny today?” The student

engaged in a brief conversation about a humorous story told by Mr. Chandler in class. The student was then asked to sit at the table for lunch. The group of students at this table had not previously engaged in social conversation with this student. The humor used in the classroom, then, was an initiating event that had the potential to create new friendships, or at least acquaintances, between members of the class. Approximately one-third of the students in the class could identify at least one new interaction that had occurred since the implementation of the “laugh stops”. These interactions varied from smiles in the hallway to brief conversations about the class. Some students even reported being introduced to new schoolmates as a result of these interactions.

Ironically, about half of the class explained the laugh stops as, “not funny”. Many of these students found themselves laughing at the quips, quotes, jokes, and stories as a result of other students in the class laughing. Sometimes, students explained they were laughing at Mr. Chandler “*trying* to be funny”. As one student commented, “Mr. Chandler is the only teacher I have that is at least *trying* to make class less boring”. When asked if they thought Mr. Chandler should continue to implement laugh stops in the classroom, every student said yes.

Comparison of Experiences

There are many similarities and differences between Mr. Chandler’s and the class’s interpretation of the use of this tool. Both teacher and student described a quicker sense of time in the class. Both also noticed an increased level of interaction, both during class time and outside of class. At times, Mr. Chandler and some students did not think the laugh stops were “funny”. It seemed to be the mere *attempt* to be humorous that led to these quicker classes and increased interactions. The students used Mr. Chandler’s class as a measuring stick with which to judge other classes. Mr. Chandler, it turns out, also frequently compared this “experimental” class to his other classes in which he did not implement the use of humor.

It is worth noting that the only person interviewed that said the insertions were awkward was Mr. Chandler. No students felt a “speed bump” in the lessons or felt uncomfortable in any manner. Mr. Chandler mentioned a decrease in discipline problems since the implementation. The students, however, did not recognize this difference even when asked specifically about it. With the exception of the quicker class period, the students in class focused their comments on their increased interactions *outside* of the classroom. These changes seemed most important to the students which left the quicker class period of secondary importance. Mr. Chandler saw the increased

in-class participation as most important and the increased out-of-class interaction as secondary. Mr. Chandler did add that the increased out-of-class interactions made him feel more confident to continue the implementation of new tools and techniques.

Conclusions

This study shows that the use of humor in the learning environment has many positive effects in the classroom. None of the predicted negative consequences appeared at any time. One of the concerns held by the teacher involved in this study was that these insertions would cause content to be left out. The humor did, indeed, take time to include and was often accompanied by a "settle down" period after the inclusion. Initially, it did seem that there would not be enough time to include each planned example, fact, and figure planned for the lesson. After the implementation took place for a few days, however, this proved not the case at all. The laugh stops in the classroom led to increased interaction and participation in class discussions as well as a greater number of questions and unsolicited comments. This increased participation caused the concepts presented in the course to be understood more quickly and more clearly. Mr. Chandler did not notice and increase or decrease in assessment scores, but did notice a greater "attempt" by students to answer essay questions. That is, more students wrote a greater number of sentences when given a writing prompt on a class topic. This is presumably because of the increased participation by many students during teacher led discussions. A greater variety of comments, opinions, and questions were present in the learning environment. These additional comments provided a greater bank of knowledge from which to draw.

This increased participation was accompanied by a decreased amount of time spent on classroom management. This could be due to the fact that the students were actually given permission to laugh, briefly talk, and react to the humor. These moments give the students an opportunity to get their talking "out of their system" so they can focus again on the content. These two factors, increased participation and decreased time spent on classroom management, compensated for the time spent actually delivering the humor itself.

Another concern was that humor is subjective and has the potential to be offensive. The pieces of humor used must be chosen carefully to not be sarcastic or offensive to any group. This task proved to be more difficult than first thought. Much time was spent pouring through jokes, quips, quotes, and stories to identify potentially inappropriate content. This was done carefully enough, evidently, that no issues, concerns, or complaints arose in this area and context. An

additional issue is that humor in one school may not be appropriate humor for another school or community. Each teacher must have a relationship and rapport with the students and community to understand what type of humor is acceptable.

This logical question deals with the definition and purpose of humor itself. What is humor? One definition of *humor* is, "the ability to appreciate or express what is funny, amusing, etc." (Guralnik, 1984, p. 295). Some students commented, however, that they did not think the "humorous" insertions used in the class were funny. The students understood that Mr. Chandler was attempting to use humor because they have a social understanding of the use of humor. An argument can be made, however, that humor had very little, or perhaps nothing, to do with the positive consequences of its use. It is important, then, to distinguish between **humor** in the learning environment and **the use of** humor in the learning environment. What is humor to Mr. Chandler may not seem like humor to some or all of the students at all. Since humor can be so subjective, it may be the *use of* humor that had positive consequences for the learning environment. If the *use* is the important factor to increasing participation and connections, the humor may be able to be swapped for something else completely. This study, then, could have looked at the effects of the *use of* storytelling, poetry reading, silent meditation, exercise, snack eating, or music listening in the classroom. All of these activities could have given students a chance to relax, process, regenerate, or evaluate the content of the course. These activities would also give students a topic that stimulates discussion outside of class. Instead of humor, it may have more to do with a change in listening modality in the classroom. A variety of these activities, and others, could be implemented to study the effects of purposeful breaks in the instruction.

Since this study was only performed over the period of about four weeks, the novelty of the implementation may also be the source of the effects. A longer term study would be required to ascertain the continued results of the use of humor. I firmly believe, however, that humor is distinct from the other activities proposed above. In only a few class periods, students were volunteering to participate actively in the reading and supply of humorous material. Happy, upbeat, feelings in the classroom are often in contrast to the seriousness of many academic courses. These release moments acted quickly and effectively to create new bonds, increase participation, and decrease time spent on classroom management.

Aside from the "use of" any specific tool in the classroom, the teacher involved was forced to break the content and instruction into smaller chunks for the implementation to take place. These breaks in the content give the students time to process content and get mentally

ready to focus on a new piece of information. The laugh stops, then, may be acting as a break which may increase retention. If the class were forty minutes in length, for instance, the students are “likely to retain more if the 40-minute period is taught in two 20-minute segments, with a short break in between” (Sousa, 1998, p. 23). Again, this fact lends to the use of *something* to be a key to the success of this study. Even if the assessment scores in the classroom have yet to be affected, I believe this study shows that the inclusion of humor, or perhaps some other purposeful, frequent activity, is well worth the effort of implementation. Students are participating in class discussions, making new friends, laughing, learning social skills, and making connections to the teacher, other students, and the school at a greater level than before implementation.

I chose to look at the effects of humor because humor has been an important factor in my own life. This study has validated my assertion that the use of humor in the learning environment has definite positive aspects. At the same time, it has opened the door to many questions about the meaning and definition of humor and the distinction between humor and its use. I hope humor can be seen as yet another tool to increase the effectiveness of the school environment and instruction. In Dr. Richard Allen’s (2002) book, Impact Teaching, he states his belief that *awareness leads to choice*. He means that people always make the best choice they can with all the information they have available at the time of the decision. This study shows that the availability of the use of humor as one of those choices proves beneficial.

References

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