

Can We Truly Laugh about Everything?

Humour in the classroom:
Balancing fun and respect

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Los Angeles, March 27, 2022. - During the Oscars award ceremony, the host, a renowned comedian, interacts with the audience, who are receptive to his jokes. The atmosphere in the theatre is relaxed and everyone seems to be having a good time. Suddenly, the comedian makes fun of an audience member who suffers an illness. Her husband gets onto the stage and gives the comedian a resounding slap. A stunned silence falls over the celebrity-filled venue. This anecdote already seems to provide an answer to the question asked in the title. As teachers, when we use humour in the classroom for pedagogical purposes, to lighten the mood or for any other reason, what steps should we take to make sure we don't hurt anyone's feelings, or, in the worst Hollywood scenario, end up with a black eye? Let's explore the topics to avoid and the best practices to adopt when sharing a laugh with students.

Why joke in class

Is teaching just serious business? Or isn't it more fun to add a touch of humour to the classroom? As part of my master's degree, I conducted research into the integration of humour to facilitate the acquisition of Italian vocabulary and, successively, valiantly undertook the mission of propagating my vision of teaching and my humorous approach to colleagues.¹ When humour is invited into the classroom, significant benefits can emerge, often in unsuspected ways! Researchers have studied the subject and the results of scientific

research in the field of humour indicate that, if used with care, it can have real benefits:

- Reducing stress related to courses and evaluations (Banas *et al.*, 2011);
- Creating teacher-student rapport and proximity and further unifying the classroom (Bogatti, 2020; Cohen, Lei & Russler, 2010; Van Praag, Stevens & Van Houtte, 2017);
- Creating a better learning climate (Banas *et al.*, 2011; Cohen, Lei & Russler, 2010; Ziv & Ziv, 2002);
- Motivating learners (Viau, 2009; Ziv & Ziv, 2002);
- Supporting and encouraging learning (Aria & Tracey, 2013; Bell, 2009; Bogatti, 2020; Cohen, Lei & Russler, 2010; Hesabi & Salehi, 2014; Kumar & Ziyaemehr, 2014; Prodanovic-Stankic, 2011; Seidman, 2016; Ziv & Ziv, 2002).

¹ On this subject, see the article "Je ris, tu ris... nous apprenons" ["I laugh, you laugh... we learn," Ed.], which appeared, in French, in the Spring 2021 issue of *Pédagogie collégiale*.

All these benefits make it a good idea to use humour in the classroom. However, while humour has the capacity to unite and bring people together through shared values and common references, it can also be divisive, pitting one person's values against another's as to what is acceptable and what is not (Meyer, 2000). And since values reflect the times and culture in which we live, in an ever-changing society, it's relevant to ask ourselves What was once amusing may.

Humour: the mirror of a changing society

Humour, the subtle art of making people laugh and smile, reflects social evolution, capturing trends and changes. Jokes, comedies, and sketches provide insight into the issues of a changing society, and over time, humour adapts to social changes, reflecting progress and challenges. What was once amusing may lose its charm or become unacceptable over time. Humour, of old, is studied through superiority theory, which explains why certain humorous situations make us laugh (Derouesné, 2016). This theory suggests that laughter stems from a feeling of

superiority over others by making fun of their misfortune (Chabanne, 2002). Between 1840 and 1940, freak shows were popular in the United States, staging performances of individuals considered anomalies of nature to elicit laughter (Bogdan, 2013). This form of humour is now unacceptable by 21st-century standards. Fortunately, new forms of comedy have emerged, such as stand-up comedy in the 1950s and 1960s. Comedians such as Richard Pryor, George Carlin and Lenny Bruce reinvented the genre by tackling social, political, and personal issues (Chabanne, 2002). However, this exploration of sensitive topics also spawned controversial shows, such as Eddie Murphy's *Raw* in 1987,



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criticized for its offensive language and inappropriate jokes about race, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships, sparking debates about the limits of humour.

Today, humour reflects contemporary issues promoting tolerance, intercultural understanding, and the celebration of diversity, while addressing themes such as gender equality, diversity, the environment and social problems. However, it can also be problematic, perpetuating prejudice and hurting people with offensive, discriminatory or stereotypical jokes. Many comedians stir up controversy and can even face censorship and justice. Who can forget the moment, in 2019, when a renowned Quebec comedian targeted a young person affected by a genetic disease during his show? The libel suit reached the highest court in the country. It's crucial to use humour responsibly, respecting everyone's sensibilities, especially in the (virtual) classroom, where the parameters are definitely not the same as in a live venue.

"No dark sarcasm in the classroom"

Using humour in the classroom can bring significant benefits in terms of engaging students in their learning, but it requires a thoughtful and careful approach. Any teacher who decides to incorporate humour into their teaching needs to consider several essential factors if it is to be beneficial and respectful. First, it's crucial to recognize that there are sensitive and inappropriate topics for jokes in the classroom. These may vary according to culture, individual sensitivity, age and changing social norms. As a result, it's imperative to examine the content

of any humour used in the classroom to avoid hurting or offending students. Let's start with the bad news by taking a tour of what is considered humorously unacceptable in the classroom today with a list that derives from the last few years of research on the subject (Appleby, 2018; Banas *et al.*, 2011; Frymier, Wanzer & Wajtaszczyk, 2008; Wanzer *et al.*, 2006).

Sexually connoted jokes

Sexuality is a complex subject that can provoke a wide range of reactions in the classroom. It's essential to be sensitive and to respect boundaries, because tackling such intimate subjects can be as tricky as trying to juggle eggs!

Sexual orientation humour

It's definitely an inappropriate area of humour to explore. The subject can easily be misinterpreted, hurtful or deeply offensive to members of the student community who identify as LGBTQ+ or to those who have loved ones in this community.

Vulgar humour

This type of humour is based on elements considered crude, inappropriate, or offensive. Vulgarity in humour can take many forms but is generally characterized by excessive use of coarse language, degrading, or insulting jokes. Elements of vulgarity can include explicit references to sexuality, discriminatory comments, or obscenities. Vulgarity in humour is inappropriate, as it lacks professionalism and can be offensive.

Ethnic or racial humour

Jokes that make fun of an individual's ethnic origin or race can be perceived

as offensive and discriminatory and go against the fundamental principles of equality and human dignity. It's better to choose forms of humour that bring people together rather than divide them.

Sensitive topics (religion, politics, and sensitive social issues)

These topics can lead to lively discussions and differences of opinion within the student community. These passionate debates, while crucial to the evolution of ideas, require a thoughtful, not humorous, approach.

Denigrating humour

Its function is to ridicule one or more individuals in terms of their personal lives, and to mock their intelligence and appearance. Denigrating humour is likely to cause hurt and emotional distress to those targeted, creating an environment that is not conducive to learning and mutual respect. The use of such humour can marginalize and humiliate some people, with negative consequences for their self-esteem and classroom participation.

Addiction jokes

Humour on the subject can be tricky, as it risks being perceived as insensitive toward students living in situations of addiction (drugs, alcohol), or whose loved ones are affected, and can potentially encourage dangerous behaviour. However, there are specific contexts, such as courses in Criminology Interventions or Police Technology, where the use of substance-related humour can be considered to defuse the seriousness of the subject.

Morbid humour

Its use in the classroom is a delicate matter. Morbid humour refers to dark subjects, often linked to death, illness, or other sensitive themes. As with all other types of humour, it's important to consider the context and potential consequences. Morbid humour may be perceived differently by students depending on their personal experiences and respective sensitivities. Some people may find morbid humour funny, while others may find it offensive or inappropriate.

Sarcasm

It's so funny when people don't understand whether you're serious or not! It's one of life's pleasures (sarcasm!). Although it can be amusing in certain contexts, this style of humour carries risks. Sarcasm can be misinterpreted by some people, especially those who have difficulty understanding linguistic nuances, such as people whose first language is not the language of instruction or who experience communication difficulties. This can lead to confusion or feelings of frustration among students, underlining the importance of considering cultural and linguistic diversity within the classroom. Moreover, sarcasm can be perceived as hurtful or humiliating to some students, especially if it is directed at a specific person or group, which can run counter to ethical values of respect and cultural inclusion. *No dark sarcasm in the classroom.* Thank you, Roger Waters.

The suggestions in this list of topics to avoid could, of course, be nuanced in the context of a course, training, or internship with just one person. When teaching one-to-one, you can adapt more to the interests, personality, and experiences of the individual in front of you. You generally have a closer

relationship with the student, which can foster a more informal environment and greater rapport. This can facilitate the use of more complex humorous topics, as you're more familiar with the person's background and limits, while it's important to consider the diversity of personalities when addressing a group of students.

The class laughs, so it's working... isn't it?

Not necessarily. The fact that some or even most students are laughing is not necessarily proof that a joke or a humorous intervention is appropriate. Sometimes we laugh because we're shocked, stressed or because an expectation has been abruptly overturned (Dion, 2007), or simply because others are laughing (we often laugh with others, which strengthens social bonds and we rarely laugh alone) (Laurin, 2019). Sometimes students laugh because they like an otherwise charming teacher, because they're a captive audience or because you're an authority figure they don't want to displease. That said, even if a teacher's role is associated with authority, that doesn't mean they're forbidden from using humour in the classroom. Teachers must always be aware of their position of authority yet have the ability to incorporate humour appropriately to enhance the learning experience. How can this be done? It's advisable to exercise some caution and consider specific criteria when approaching appropriate humorous topics.

Guide to appropriate humour in the classroom

Generally, positive humour, such as funny stories or jokes related to the

course content, should be favoured (Banas *et al.*, 2011; Wanzer *et al.*, 2006). Here are some tips and ideas for your next classes.

Anecdotes and funny stories

This is a popular activity with students, and an effective learning technique (Brakke & Houska, 2015; Jones & Richardson, 2021). A funny story is a narrative whose main objective is to make people laugh. It features characters, comic situations, jokes and puns. An anecdote is a short account of everyday life or a personal experience that you can enrich with humour. Sharing funny personal experiences related to the subject being taught can make it easier to make complex notions more accessible. Grobman (2015), a professor at California State University, used this method to illustrate and simplify the concepts of the laws of physics by recounting an amusing anecdote from his own move, during which his mattress had inadvertently obstructed the opening of the removal van door. The aim was to introduce the concept of inertia and Newton's first law.



Word games

Puns are often great fun, especially if you use them in a subtle and clever way. In language, it's sometimes possible to find a funny double entendre. In my Italian course, I often use the word "penne" as an example to introduce the notion of double consonant pronunciation. I point out that when pronounced correctly, the word refers to a type of Italian pasta. However, if pronounced differently, it can be heard as "pene," which has a different meaning² and is not, as you've probably guessed, related to food.

Funny pictures

You can show humorous images or memes related to the course content, where appropriate. Teenagers are particularly active on social net-

works such as TikTok, Instagram or Snapchat, where memes are often shared. If you're thinking of creating memes, remember, however, that their popularity can vary over time and evolve according to trends and young people's interests. New memes appear regularly, and some quickly become obsolete while others persist in popular online culture. For turnkey ideas, you can consult the *Meme Generator* site to find inspiration among the most popular images of the moment.

Comic performance

If you're a talented performer and sometimes think you've missed your chance to become a humorist or comedian, you can add a theatrical and humorous touch to your course by creating lessons in the form of a comedy show: maybe you could become the

next Boucar Diouf! But not everyone can write jokes to perform on stage. You always have the option of seeking help. There are books like *Écrire l'humour, c'est pas des farces!* [*Writing Humour Is Not a Joke*, Ed.] (Ouellette & Vien, 2017). It's a toolbox of sorts, aimed at helping anyone who wants to channel their humorous potential to write punchy, effective gags.

² Ah, but isn't that sexually connoted humour? Am I contradicting myself? Not necessarily. The word "penis" isn't vulgar in itself, since it's a medical or anatomical term used to designate the male reproductive organ. Life isn't just black and white, there are nuances to everything.



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Self-deprecation

Self-deprecation or laughing at oneself (without exaggerating) is a humorous approach most appreciated by students (Appleby, 2018; Banas *et al.*, 2011; Bogatti, 2020; Frymier *et al.*, 2008; Wanzer *et al.*, 2006). Teachers who put themselves on the spot in humorous activities help establish a connection with the class by reducing distance and revealing their more human side (Cohen, Lei & Russler, 2010). Self-deprecation can help create a relaxed classroom atmosphere and build trust with students for several reasons. Firstly, when teachers show that they don't take themselves too seriously and are able to laugh at themselves, it makes them more approachable and human in the eyes of the group. This attitude can break down the barriers that sometimes exist with learners, fostering a better connection. Secondly, being self-deprecating shows students that everyone makes mistakes, including teachers. This supports participation, as learners can feel more comfortable making mistakes themselves, without fear of being judged. If you feel comfortable with this approach, you can allow yourself to laugh at various aspects of yourself, such as your characteristics (e.g., poor eyesight), your competencies (e.g., not being good at manual work), mistakes you make in class, or even an embarrassing personal story (Wanzer *et al.*, 2006).

Conclusion

Using humour in the classroom can bring many benefits, such as reducing stress, creating teacher-student rapport, improving the learning climate, motivating students, and supporting learning. However, it is crucial to use it responsibly and to take into account

the sensitivities of each individual. Humour evolves with social change and reflects society's concerns. What was considered funny in the past may become unacceptable or offensive over time. Therefore, it's important to know what topics to avoid in class, such as humour that is vulgar, ethnically or racially denigrating, religious, political, sexually connoted or related to sensitive social issues. These topics can offend some students, disrupt classroom harmony, and compromise self-esteem and student participation. By using humour carefully and by avoiding these sensitive

topics, teachers can create a relaxed atmosphere and foster engagement within the student community. It's also important to remain aware of cultural and individual differences in the way humour is perceived, and to adapt its use accordingly. In short, humour can be a powerful tool in teaching and learning, but it must be used thoughtfully and respectfully. By taking individual sensitivities into account and avoiding offensive topics, teachers can create an environment conducive to learning, mutual respect and inclusion. —



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