
HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM: STU'S SEVEN SIMPLE STEPS TO SUCCESS

Stuart V. Hellman

Abstract. So you want to use humor in your classroom but think it will be inappropriate? After all, you might be thinking, you teach a very serious subject and do not want to turn your classroom into a three-ring circus. But even when teaching technical courses as systems analysis and computer programming, you can still use humor effectively in the classroom. This article explains types of humor that have worked for me, introduces tips and tricks you may not have tried in your classroom, and looks at some theory behind the use of humor.

The first thing you should ask yourself is, "Why do I want to add humor to my teaching methods?" Remember that you are an educator, not a stand-up comic. If you were the latter, you would be appearing at the local comedy club for open-mic night. Humor should be used as a tool for learning, never as a distraction.

One reason to use humor is to keep students interested. Incorporate some into your lectures or examples to see if your students are paying attention. Make the humor quick and unexpected. I call this

"guerrilla humor"—you get in, make your point, and get on to the next topic.

Try starting each class with some type of humor. Humor can be an icebreaker and set the tone for the rest of the period. On occasion, you could produce an official-looking document and act as if you are about to read an important announcement. Then tell a joke. Guerrilla humor strikes!

Another reason to use humor is to create an atmosphere conducive to learning (Knowles 1984). This is one of the first steps for adults in learning how to learn. We as educators want to alleviate the possibility of an adversarial relationship with our students. The best thing you can do for students is have them feel relaxed while in the classroom. One of the benefits of using humor is to release endor-

phins, which are natural painkillers produced when laughing.

Once you know why you should use humor, you can explore how to use it effectively. So without further ado, here are Stu's Seven Simple Steps for Success.

Step 1: Be Yourself

For some people, humor comes naturally; others have to practice so it does not seem forced. Humor should seem smooth and like a natural part of your speech pattern. Another hint: Do not laugh at your own joke. It detracts from the humor.

If you have trouble telling a joke, do not do it! There are many other forms of humor you can use, such as visual humor. The Internet is full of pictures and graphics you can display. Project those pictures on a screen in front of the classroom at the beginning of the class or while you are getting your lesson materials organized. That way, you do not have to say a word but still get a humorous effect.

A little whimsy in your wardrobe is another form of visual humor. In some settings, instructors are supposed to maintain a businesslike appearance. The typical business manager wears a suit and tie. How many men enjoy starting each day by putting a tourniquet about their neck? If you have to wear a tie, have fun with it. Good selections for the collection are the "Looney Tunes" gang, "Peanuts" characters, Scooby-Doo, and my favorite, Mr. Spock (who else epitomizes logical think-

Stuart V. Hellman is a professor of computer information systems at DeVry University in Addison, Illinois.

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ing and analysis?). Women can do the same with their accessories: watches, bracelets, and pins display these same characters.

Another form of humor to use is audio humor. When was the last time you used a sound file in one of your lectures? In my systems analysis class, one lecture is devoted to the types of business strategies, including a niche market. There is a great two-minute sound clip of Abbott and Costello playing on the word “niche.” Again, there are plenty of Web sites that provide comical sound files.

Step 2: Pick Your Spots

There is a time for humor and there is a time to be serious. (Is that a song by the Byrds?) As educators, we want to build rapport with students, but at the same time, we do not want to sacrifice a professional atmosphere.

You can “verbally abuse” students, but do it only occasionally. There will always be students who volunteer to be the target of these darts. Often a quick comment or one-liner about being late to class or leaving early will do the trick.

Try to integrate humor into the learning objective. Ziv (1981) stated that you should not use more than three or four instances or “doses” of humor in a one-hour time period. Use an outrageous example when introducing a new topic or concept. When the laughter dies down, go through and explain the concepts again in a serious, straight tone. The humor should not detract from the lesson or topic being taught.

Humor is another tool in your bag of tricks. You need to use discretion about when to use humor and when not to use it. In a recipe, you—the chef—need a bit of this and a dash of that. The same concept is true for humor. Too much humor and you lose the students’ respect. Not enough humor and you probably will not have their full attention.

Step 3: Be Politically Correct

Nowadays, we live in such a diverse society that it seems that anything you say will offend someone. Step 3 applies here. You need to know with whom you are dealing (see step 4) to know whether you can say something. Sometimes humor is based on differences. One needs to be sensitive to diversity and, if possible, embrace

that diversity. Any attempt of humor that marginalizes a group should be avoided.

A female student once told me about an instructor who made off-color or sexist remarks. By doing this, the instructor lost the respect of this particular student and probably of many more.

Be careful of the unintended humor in the language you use. The English language is one of the most unusual in the world. It has more exceptions than rules. With all the homonyms and double meanings, you can get yourself into trouble.

Take, for example, the statement “I never get lost; everyone tells me where to go.” At face value, the sentence says that people are eager to help me find my destination. But the twist is that in American slang, “telling someone where to go” does not have a nice connotation. Another statement is “I am mechanically inclined; I can screw up anything.” Again, the double meaning has humorous results.

These two examples point the humor at me, the instructor, so they are okay. But be careful not to inadvertently hurt your students. So how do you get around this situation? Use euphemisms to refer to different situations. Someone who is not very tall in stature is “vertically challenged.” Never give exams or tests—give students “chances to excel.”

Step 4: Know Your Audience

This is true for any speaking situation. If you are speaking outside of a group’s frame of reference, the message and meaning will be lost. Use the initial meeting of a course to get to know your students and to allow them to become familiar with your “unique” method of instruction. The class composition is important. You need to know what types of students you have in the classroom; this knowledge could save you from embarrassment later. Be aware of different cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds. Gaining this knowledge will help you to be PC (see step 3).

The generation gap is a good common reference point. I teach at the undergraduate level, where the majority of the students are in their late teens or early twenties. Many things these students take for granted had not yet been invented twenty or thirty years ago. You can get a few laughs when you use your slide rule to do some calculations.

Another way to get to know your students is while taking attendance on the first day of class. The first day is often an uncomfortable situation: the students are not sure about what to expect from you, and you are not sure what kind of students you have in the room. Tell them you want to get the attendance duties out of the way quickly and ask those who are not present to raise their hand. This statement brings laughter and relieves some tension, and you get to see which students want to be the class clown. As noted in step 2, you just found a student or two to be the targets of your “verbal abuse.”

Step 5: Use Oxymorons, Alliteration, and Acronyms

An oxymoron is two seemingly contradictory terms put together, such as “virtual reality,” “jumbo shrimp,” and “tax return.” This type of humor is good for guerrilla humor. Just make a quick quip or one-liner and go on to the next topic in your lesson plan.

Students will remember more or have better retention when you use extreme examples. Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) state that using humorous examples within the context of the topic will cause the recall of the examples to be good. The extreme examples will be remembered better than textbook examples. But make sure that you also cover the same points in a more straightforward way.

Another opportunity I have to inject humor is in the names in the test data files of my computer programming classes. I use puns (Al B. Tross, Tyrone Shoelaces, Ben Dover, and Helen Back), real names of famous people (Richard Starkey, Marion Michael Morrison, Frances Gumm, and William Claude Dukenfield), and superheroes’ “secret identities” (Bruce Wayne, Barry Allen, Anthony Stark, and Ben Grimm). As a quick aside, why does everyone know their identity if it is a secret? (And was that another example of guerrilla humor?)

Alliteration is also humorous. Would you have read this article if the subtitle had not been added? I have a Web site where I post my current term’s schedule and a little background information about myself. The title of my Web site: “Hellman’s Home for Hopeless Hackers.”

Along the same lines as alliteration are made-up acronyms. A good example of an acronym is Microsoft: "Most Intelligent Customers Realize Our Software Only Fools Them." An acronym for Windows is "Will Install Needless Data Onto Working System." In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a programming language named COBOL, which has now been replaced by Java and C++. Everyone knows that this word is an acronym of "Completely Obsolete Business-Oriented Language."

Step 6: Sometimes, You Need to Be Quiet

When some students speak, they get nervous and are not always aware of what they say. Others suffer from an affliction commonly known as "diarrhea of the mouth." These students start talking but do not know when to stop. In either situation, just let them talk and sooner or later they will say something humorous. These types of statements range from saying something that has a double meaning to the student getting flustered and just saying "never mind!" after talking for five minutes and saying nothing.

One can occasionally sense that something is coming when a student starts ram-

bling. You know that given enough time, the student will figuratively put their foot in their mouth. Just keep quiet and let them talk. Try to keep a straight face, but anticipate something unexpected to be said or to happen.

Step 7: Acknowledge Others' Humor

You do not have to be the originator of the humor. A large percentage of the humor I use is from other sources. Take something that another instructor has done and adapt the humor to your personal style (see step 1).

This advice works for the give and take with students. As stated in step 2, I "verbally abuse" my students. In turn, I am willing to take the good-natured ribbing that I get back from them. If a student "gets" me good, I keep score on the board: "Student—1, Instructor—0."

What you do not want to do is get the last word. Let the student have his or her moment in the sun. Unfortunately, I do not always follow this rule myself, and the superiority/winning concept takes over (Gruner 1997). My usual response is either "I hope you enjoy taking this course again" or "I make it a rule to never

have a battle of wits with an unarmed person." The class as a whole has a good laugh, but the target of my barbs just lost—and I may have, too.

Conclusion

Humor can be an effective tool in any classroom, when used appropriately. Use the type of humor that is right for you and your students. Use those first couple of class meetings to get an indication of the class dynamics and the students' personalities. What works for me may not work for you and your particular situation.

The best piece of advice that I can give was stated in step 1: be yourself. The situation is just like how you get to Carnegie Hall: practice, practice, and practice (yes, guerrilla humor is alive and well).

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