

Avner Ziv, "Teaching and Learning with Humor: Experiment and Replication", *The Journal of Experimental Education* 57 (1988), 5-15

Summarized by Dr. Kareen Seidler

Avner Ziv carried out two studies showing that targeted use of humour in university lectures leads to better exam results. The students can more easily retain course material that has been associated with humour.

The teachers participated in a seminar on "Humour in teaching" before the beginning of the survey. The study lasted for one semester. Two groups of students participated in each study. They both had the same teacher. For one group, the lecturer used humour while teaching, for the other he did not. The author replicated his study, once observing a psychology lecture, once a statistics lecture. The results were confirmed. The jokes and humour used for the lectures was chosen carefully, so as to be relevant to the teaching material and closely related to the content of the lecture. Three to four instances of humour (jokes, cartoons or anecdotes) per hour were set as ideal. (This was also the mean amount of jokes counted in a previous study which evaluated 70 recorded lectures [Bryant et al. 1980].) If the lecturer had used more humour, he would have been perceived as a clown. Yet care was taken that the amount of humour was not the same in each lecture so as not to appear automated. Consequently, some lectures contained no humour at all.

Humour was incorporated into teaching as follows: the lecturer explained a new concept. He then illustrated it with a cartoon or a joke. Once the laughter had subsided, he summarized the new concept again.

At the end of the term, the students took their normal final exams (a multiple-choice test). The results clearly showed that targeted use of content-related humour improved the students' test results. They had better grades in their final exams than the groups which had listened to lectures without humorous elements. Hence, humour can help students in the process of learning and memorizing.

Spontaneous humour is also useful in teaching. It can help to lighten the atmosphere. Yet, Ziv concludes, it will not necessarily have positive impacts on learning, as the use of well-directed, prepared humour does.

Ziv does not fail to add that not all kinds of humour will have positive effects. Sarcasm may actually have detrimental consequences. And, he adds, teachers who "believe that humor may present a danger or are embarrassed by it" should generally avoid using it in the first place (14).

Examples

The teacher of a psychology course explained the concept of conditioning, then he "told the following joke to the class:

One morning a man walks to his work and looks up a building. From a window on the eighth floor, a beautiful, charming, splendid, blonde, young woman looks at him. His heart thumping, he decides that this is the most wonderful woman he has seen in his life and he'll

do anything to have her. He runs into the building, finds that the elevator doesn't work, and starts running up the stairs. First floor, second, third, . . . sixth, . . . seventh. By now, he has difficulty breathing, and his climbing is much slower. But, he continues, dreaming about the wonderful lady he's going to meet. Finally, a bit out of breath, he gets to the eighth floor. He rings. A huge, muscular, angry-looking man opens the door.

'Can I see the blonde lady?'

Before he finishes the last word, the huge guy starts hitting him with tremendous blows on his face and body and finally a kick in the back that throws him a few floors down the hard stairs. Getting up with difficulty, our hero limps toward his work.

The next day, passing by the building, he looks up and there she is again, even more beautiful and smiling at him. He decides that whatever happens, he must have her. Into the building, running up the stairs. First, second, . . . fifth floor. It's rather difficult, hard to breathe, but he feels love and courage and goes on. Before her door, still breathing hard, he rings. The huge, muscular, angry-looking guy opens the door, takes a look at him, and starts beating him. This time, falling down the stairs of the entire building, his body feeling completely broken, his face badly bruised, he has barely the force to find a taxi and go to the hospital. After some stitches and bandages, he is sent home and ordered to stay in bed for 2 days.

The third day, he walks by the building, looks up . . . and there she is, even more wonderful than he remembered – splendid, sweet, and smiling at him. No hesitation! He starts up the stairs (he doesn't have the strength to run, but he climbs steadily). First, second. . . .

Finally, again out of breath, he is at her door, he rings, and she opens the door. Looking at her in wonder, he says,

'Where is the big guy?'

When [the teacher had] finished the joke and after the students' laughter, he said, 'Here's conditioning for you.' Then he repeated the definition of conditioning that he explained before the joke." (11-12)

The second example is from a course in statistics.

"While teaching about means and standard deviations, the teacher projected a slide of a cartoon prepared in advance on a screen. It showed an explorer in Africa, talking to a few native children who watch him somewhat surprised. Behind the explorer, and without his being aware of it, is a huge crocodile with a wide-open mouth, ready to swallow him. He, addressing the kids, says, 'There is no need to be afraid of crocodiles; around here their average length is only about 50 centimeters.' One of the children says to another, 'This guy had better think about the standard deviation, too.'" (10)

Again, the teacher concluded with a paraphrase of the concept he had explained before.