Student Survey Question

What do you think about professors using humor in the classroom?

It’s official: out of 50 students polled, 100% felt that humor was an effective pedagogical tool – with the caveat that it be used appropriately.

Does humor have a place in the classroom? Sure, if the classroom is where human beings need to have worthwhile interaction. Here is what humor does: it relieves tension and dissolves barriers; it creates opportunities for shared moments and the strengthening of bonds. Humor helps students to see their teachers as human beings who are alive, not calcified! A good laugh can shake the cobwebs out of the brain and open people up to new ways of thinking.

The tough part is how to do it because there are certainly many funny things that are not appropriate to the classroom, and the truth is, not everything we find funny may actually be funny or harmless. The key here is planned integration of humor. Spontaneous humor is great if you can pull it off, but it also has the potential to get you into trouble, i.e., to have the opposite effect than what you intend, which is to improve the teaching and learning atmosphere.

Some hard and fast rules about using humor in the classroom:
- Don’t make fun of an individual person other than yourself,
- Don’t tell jokes of a sexual nature,
- Don’t make fun of body types, sexual orientation, race, religion etc.
- Only tease students when it is clear that you have permission to do so (ask them in private, or be aware of how respond to you in class)

The easiest kind of humor to plan for are jokes that make reference to your field; they may be groaners, but students may still laugh precisely because they’re so awful. Remember, a failed joke can be just as funny as a winner if you know how to react to it. Your own anecdotes can bring relevancy, humor, and personality to a topic.

Cartoons are a great way to break up a Power Point, and top ten lists of the Letterman sort can function as a very effective break to realign the attention of your students during a long lecturing session. You can also get your students involved in bringing good jokes or stories to class. By far the most effective use of humor is when
we (the high and mighty), poke fun at ourselves. For more information on using humor in the classroom, go to: plattsburgh.edu/offices/centers/cte/humorintheclassroom.php

In their words

“I think humor is a huge asset in the classroom. When students feel they can relate to the professor and are more comfortable, I feel they are more likely to do better.”
—Kayla Stark

“I feel that humor in the classroom can be an effective method to reaching out to a majority of the students. As a senior at SUNY Plattsburgh, I’ve found that I perform best in classes where my professors from time to time have presented the material in a humorous fashion. Overall, if used appropriately, humor can be a vital tool in the classroom.”
—Lisa Woolard

“Humor in the classroom lightens up the mood in the room. I think teachers that are humorous grab my attention better.”
—Zachary Kruizenge

Notes from the SCTE Chair, Dave Layman, Adolescence Education, BA/MST, 2011

Humor can bring a class together, but it can also tear it apart. There’s science behind the notion that a comfortable, relaxed student learns better, and what better way to increase comfort than by integrating a little humor into the classroom? Tread carefully with humor, however, because making fun of someone can be perceived as aggression against them, and a brain in a confrontational situation simply shuts down. By all means, use humor, but be sure to choose the target of your humor carefully.

Students on Teaching with Humor

What gets rave reviews:

• Making jokes relevant to current culture and class topic
• Professors who laugh at themselves
• Using humor the first day of class to set a good tone for the rest of the semester

What doesn’t:

• Making fun of students or other professors
• Trying to be funny about serious topics – you don’t know what may hit home for some students
• Sarcasm – it’s not funny

Students on students

Do this:

• Cut your professors some slack when they’re trying to use humor – try to laugh with them

Take your cue from the professor as to when it’s time to joke around
• Make your own jokes relevant to the material

Don’t do this:

• Don’t laugh at your professors, laugh with them
• Don’t be a class clown
• Don’t use humor to undermine your professor

The February Teacher of the Month

Suki Gras, Lecturer, Economics and Finance

Excerpts from nominating submissions:

“She understands that we are young college students and tries her best to connect to us and teach us the material in a way that we can best understand. I never had a teacher who cared so much about not only how well we do in her class but our well being as humans. I will never forget the learning experience and all the times she made us laugh in class.”

“She has these life lessons that she talks about while teaching the class. She makes all of us laugh at least twice during the class period. She specifically tells us what we need to write down and she explains all lessons more than once so we understand them. She always asks of we have any questions and takes time to explain them all.”

Suki is one of the many faculty who have been repeatedly nominated for this award, and it is a happy coincidence that her students remark about how funny she is in the classroom. When I asked her what she does that so amuses the students, she could only reply, “I don’t know what I do. Maybe it’s because I belittle myself.”

The fact that she is comfortable making fun of herself is really part of a holistic attitude she has in her relationship with the students, one that is open to what the students have to teach her. “I am who I am because of my students,” she says. “They enrich my life.” It is clear from the student nominations that Suki has found how rewarding it can be to find joy in teaching: “When I am joyous for my students, I laugh and share with them.” This is the heart of excellence in teaching.

Suki now joins six other SUNY Plattsburgh faculty in their possession of the exclusive CTE Teacher of the Month coffee mug.

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