Theory to Practice

Considering Humor and Adult Education

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Abstract

Humor is found in almost every aspect of our lives, it is found in the workplace, interactions with family and friends, social and other media, and in educational contexts. Many educators integrate humor into their teaching with various measures of success. However, using humor for instructional purposes without a firm understanding of humor theory is akin to cooking a meal without a recipe. It sometimes works, but more often fails. To use humor more effectively in educational contexts, instructors need to understand its foundational roots; this work provides a summary of the most prevalent humor theories and a set of guidelines for integrating humor into adult educational practice.

Introduction

Humor and shared laughter are basic and fundamental parts of human interaction. From an intellectual perceptive, humor functions in numerous ways; to teach, amuse, and often to make connections (between people as well as ideas). Jokes, puns, wordplay and other forms of humor exist across numerous focus areas and practices; however, Raskin (2008) explains that many venture into investigations (as well as uses) of humor from their disciplinary perch without understanding the sizable body of knowledge on the subject. This large body of knowledge that spans various contexts has linked humor with coping and stress (Abel, 2002; Avtgis, & Taber, 2006), communications and interactions (Collinson, 1988;

Fine & DeSoucey, 2005), leadership (Anderson, 2005; Brooks, 1992), and teaching and learning (Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Garner, 2006; Wanzer, 2002; Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010;), among other topics.

Many educators try (with varying degrees of success) to integrate humor into their practice based on evidence that it fosters analytic, critical, and divergent thinking; catches and holds students' attention; and increases retention of learned material. However, educators and trainers, seduced by the desire to be perceived as a funny person, may end up losing instructional effectiveness because of misguided attempts at humor. Roth, Yap, and Short (2006) caution teachers and trainers of adults not to use humor merely to boost their ego as standup comics because of the possibility of turning interventions into entertainment sessions rather than segments of learning and engagement. Martin (2007) argued that the psychological and functional outcomes of humor are not clearly delineated. The nature and purposefulness of humor applications rely on an instructor's foundational and theoretical understanding of humor. In other words, instructors would be wise to have a working understanding of humor theory prior to systemically integrating humor into their instructional practice. To use humor more effectively in educational contexts, instructors need to understand its foundational roots. The purpose of this brief theory and practice article is to help the readership build such an understanding. After presenting a brief synopsis of humor theory, I will review how to put the knowledge of humor theory into practice.

Humor Theory

Humor is an extraordinary construct and its explanation is complex and often debated. Although the exact number of humor theories is contested in the literature, Haig (1988) places the estimate at over one hundred. Theories and definitions relating to humor arise from multiple scholarly perspectives such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, physiology, philosophy, and communications. The most pervasive humor theories are the tripartite classifications of humor: incongruity, superiority, and tension release (Lynch, 2002; Carrell, 2008).

Incongruity
Incongruity theory is more focused on cognition than the social and psychological aspects of humor (Martin, 2007), making it particularly relevant to the work of educators. Incongruity involves the juxtaposition of the expected versus the unexpected – this flip of expectations is at the

heart of the punchlines of jokes and funny stories. When a joke is told an expectation emerges from the listener's frame of reference regarding how the course of events should proceed within the joke's context (Attardo, 1994; Robert & Yan, 2007). According to Morreal (2009), an essential element of incongruity theory is that knowledge works with learned events; that is to say, what we have experienced prepares us to deal with what we will experience. The unexpected deviation from what would be anticipated as normal is what gives pleasure or what is found to be funny, "Incongruity theories regard the rapid resolution of incongruity as crucial to the generation of laughter" (Haig, 1988, p.10). The surprise twist, the unusual, the difference of what we expect versus what is presented provides the humorous element. The unexpected endings trigger two dissenting thoughts; it is this "simultaneous activation of two contradictory perceptions that is the essence of humor" (Martin, 2007, p. 63). 'Take my wife…..please' is the decades old one liner used by many comedians, and it is a good example of a punchline flipping the listener's expectation.

Morreal (2009) described a number of philosophical critiques of incongruity theory. He noted that an unexpected ending does not necessarily lead to humor -- all incongruity is not funny. For example, he posed the question "how could anyone enjoy the violation of their conceptual patterns and experience?" (p. 13). Certain attempts at humor involve incongruity that does not lead to humor, only confusion. All of us have experienced the puzzling sensation of not getting a joke because we did not recognize the intended humor of the punchline. In other cases, the incongruity might violate mental models that we possess, and negative emotions such as fear and anger can emerge from the incongruity. Several humor theorists believe that for incongruity to be amusing, it must be presented as safe and clearly playful in its intentions (Gervais & Wilson, 2005). La Fave and Maeson (1996, p. 89) provide a thoughtful discussion of the elements of a theory of humor, and they delineate the roles of three elements in their discussion. Their theory is succinctly presented here: "Necessary ingredients of an adequate theory of humor would seem to involve a (1) sudden (2) happiness ingredient (such as a feeling of superiority or heightened self-esteem) as a consequence of a (3) perceived incongruity."

Individuals need a shared understating or frame of reference in order to understand humor. This shared understanding allows people to make the connection between incongruent elements, determine their relationships, and possibly lead to a humorous reaction based on the happiness

ingredient. It is up to the recipient or audience to perceive the incongruity and ascertain if and how much humor exists (Carrell, 2008). If recipients do not understand the context and content of the joke, then the incongruity may not be deemed amusing, or perhaps could even come off as socially awkward. One of the great challenges of attempting to use humor across cultures is to ensure that recipients understand the context of the joke and recognize the intended humor of the punchline. Even if people are from the same culture, if the joke is too complex, or the content is not understood, then the recipient will probably not understand the communication of what is intended to be funny. Inside jokes exist when both the producer and receiver of humor have a shared understanding of a particular phenomenon; however, those outside of that understanding will most likely be puzzled by the incongruity. A non-cultural example of this is a joke involving calculus: Q: What's the integral of (1/cabin) d(cabin)? A: A natural log cabin! For those who understand calculus (not this author), this incongruent twist is understood and amusing, for the rest of us, not so much.

Morreal (2009) linked the resolution of the challenges of incongruity theory to further exploration of the human condition. He expressed that people who enjoy incongruity are likely to enjoy life's twists and turns. He portrayed them as those who take getting lost along the way as an opportunity for discovery, a puzzle to be enjoyed and solved, and not a misfortune.

Superiority

Superiority or hostility humor is linked to a sense of superiority coming from the disparagement of another group or individual (Martin, 2007), and typically in such uses of humor winners and losers emerge. Some may feel entertained in feeling they perceive they are better in one way, shape, or form than another person or group. Aggressive humor takes on many forms and has several important outcomes. Most all have encountered some sort of teasing as a child. Teasing may manifest into bullying as children get older, and aggressive forms of humor can certainly carry over into adulthood in the forms of bullying, harassment, and incivility in workplaces.

Aggressive humor is commonly targeted at areas of difference among individuals and groups of people. Age, gender, sexual orientation, physical condition, ethnicity, and other areas of difference can be the targets of disparaging humor. An example of a joke told by women

against men is: Q: How many men does it take to change a roll of toilet paper? A: We don't know. It's never been done. In this example, a rather innocent conundrum occurs, and the resulting humor and laughter would probably be viewed in an affirmative light. However, superiority humor frequently conveys negative connotations. All racist and homophobic jokes trace their roots to superiority humor theory. Morreal (2009, p. 7) provides a philosophical perspective that humor and laugher at the cost of others "undermines cooperation, tolerance, and self control," and such humor outcomes can clearly be detrimental to human relations. Disparagement humor promotes a climate of tolerance of discrimination and reinforces hostility towards the target group (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). For example, several sexual and racial harassment court cases have documented that incidents of disparaging humor contributed to the evolution of intolerable workplaces and unsafe working conditions for female and minority workers.

Some forms of superiority humor do not target or ridicule outside groups, they act in self-deprecation as a preemptive strike against belittlement; e.g., your laughing at us doesn't harm us -- we laugh at ourselves. Bing and Heller (2003) discussed that although such humor is "inherently deconstructive" (p. 164), certain members of the LGBT community mock themselves to display a sense of community and identity. According to Bing and Heller a common joke representing this phenomenon is: Q: What does a lesbian bring on a second date? A: A U-Haul. This joke is not sexually related; rather, it pokes fun at lesbian cultural features and characteristics by pointing out the silliness of committing to a relationship too quickly. Its ok to laugh at our own shortcomings, possessing the ability to laugh at our own foibles keeps us in balance (Martin, 2007).

In congruence with the calculus joke above, some professionals poke fun at themselves, and in a sense they are using superiority humor in two manners. First, they use it as a form of self-deprecation. Second, they use it to showcase the superiority of their intellect. Their inference may be summed up as, 'We get this joke, you probably don't -- therefore, we are smarter than you (see calculus joke above). For example: Come to the dork side we have π. This joke has several cultural nuances. The dork side refers to those with strong math skills being referred to as dorks in elementary and secondary schools, and it also references the dark side from the Star Wars (1977) movies. The punchline follows with the word play of the geometric symbol π as pie. This example shows that simple jokes can be congruent with more than one theory, adding to their complexity for scholars and practitioners.

Superiority humor theory is contested in the literature from various standpoints; for example, Gruner (1997) described some superiority humor as merely playful aggression, not disparagement of others. He further stated that being aggressive or competitive with others is part of our evolutionary makeup, part of what allowed humans as a species to evolve and survive. Teasing can be ambiguous; for example, goading might bring negative attention, yet other indicators express playful intent (Campos, Keltner, Beck, Gonzaga, & John, 2007). A case in point is research regarding superiority humor that has resulted in positive functional outcomes. Both Vivona (2014a) and Plesters and Sayers (2007) revealed that banter, defined as "a means to deflate someone else's ego to bring them to the same level as others" (p.158), can indicate healthy social bonds within select workgroups and can function as a sign of acceptance into the group. Thus, if you are included in the workplace banter you are accepted as part of the group. Conversely, if you are not included in the banter, the group might be indicating that you are not fully accepted into the group. In addition, during the acculturation process that frequently occurs in work settings, certain forms of aggressive humor can be purposefully applied as a method to learn and understand one's roles and position within the organization.

Tension Relief

Tension relief theory of humor is based on a belief that a release of energy occurs through the physical reactions of laughter (Carrell, 2008; Martin, 2007). Freud (as cited in Carrell, 2008) believed the pleasure derived from the release of tension embodied all humor. Tension relief theory purports that laughter is a result of humor and is not inherently disparaging as prescribed by superiority theory (not laughing at anyone), nor is it susceptible to elements of confusion as noted above regarding incongruity theory. It is "simply a way of discharging nervous energy found to be unnecessary" (Morreal, 2009, p. 17).

Relief theory is most common in situations of tension and stress; many authors have determined that in stressful contexts humor provides relief that allows the individual to function (Abel, 2002; Lefcourt & Thomas, 1998). For many people laughter has a cathartic effect (Morreall, 2009). We have all probably experienced the seemingly disparate emotions of crying and laughing at the sad events of wakes and funerals. Although we are greatly saddened by the loss of a loved one, we are still able to chuckle as family and friends reminisce about humorous stories and life events of the deceased person. The laughter that emerges feels

like a huge weight has been lifted from deep inside of us. However, such release should not be confused with nervous laughter under tense situations, such laughter is not in fact a result of humor, it is a physiological response to stress (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997).

Another subtext of relief theory is that many jokes and humorous stories build tension during their telling, and the punch line (often incongruent) releases this tension. Good storytellers are well aware that to be effective they need to hook listeners into a playful mood and build their emotional bond with the story as the story slowly unfolds. Storytellers and comedians insert smaller pieces of humor, known as play frames, to keep the listeners engaged and to build the emotional tension up to the point of release with the punch line. Arousal theory relates that the recipient's attention is stimulated during the telling of the story, this arousal is uncomfortable, the punch line releases that discomfort and results in laughter (McGhee, 1971; 1983). Such jokes and stories of course take longer to communicate, or set up, than some of the one-liners we often associate with joke telling.

Can You Tell Me How to Get to Carnegie Hall? Practice

Using humor for instructional purposes without a firm understanding of humor's myriad effects, both positive and negative, is akin to cooking a meal without a recipe. It sometimes works, but more often fails. Worse yet, the instructor may not understand the reasons why it has been successful or failed. Instructors who understand the application of incongruity, superiority, and tension release theory may avoid getting egg on their face (being laughed at, which would be a form of superiority humor) in the classroom.

Inappropriate Humor
A challenge of using humor in educational contexts is the construct of appropriateness. What is perceived as funny to one person may be offensive to another. The humor does not reside in the joke or the story, the humor resides in each individual's head (Roth, 2008) and, as we all know, the content of each person's head is different from all of the others. Learners come from varied backgrounds, and their understandings of appropriateness of humor may vary greatly, skewed by their personal experiences with behavioral norms and learned experiences (Vivona, 2014b). The initiator may have the best intentions with an attempt at humor; however, if a comment meant to be humorous is received as of-

fensive, the negative outcomes will be problematic. Most people realize that attempts at humor that involve race, gender, religion, and other areas of difference are taboo in most contexts; additionally, attempts at humorous exchanges (such as using curse words to be funny) may be equally derisive. Common sense tells us that such humor should be prohibited, yet these forms of humor exist on college campuses and in the workplace (Martin, 2004; Ivy & Hamlet, 1996; Tracy & Scott, 2006). They also continue to surface in discrimination and sexual harassment lawsuits (examples being, Dysert v. Whirlpool Corp., 2001; Griffin v. City of Opa-Loca,2001; Volovsek v. Wisconsin Dept. of Agriculture, 2003).

Using superiority humor, other than in a self-deprecating way, is typically unsuitable in the classroom. Humor that targets students produces a climate of aggression, not learning. Self-deprecating humor is a form of superiority humor in which the initiator is the target of joking; however, its application in the classroom is a contested issue in the literature. On the one hand, it can be used to connect with the audience by making the recipient feel superior and thus equalize the initiator-receiver relationship. Meyer (2000) and Gordon (2010) argued that when "teachers laugh at themselves the student realizes that teachers are human too and that learning…is a difficult process that entail making mistakes" (p. 747).

Countering the above argument, Kirsh and Kuiper (2003) presented that such attempts at humor are often maladaptive. Being able to laugh and not take oneself too seriously is often viewed as a positive aspect of a sense of humor (Martin, 2007; Morreal, 2009; Ruch, 2008). However, although self-deprecating humor is often viewed from a positive perspective, it can easily degrade into self-defeating humor, which consists of unreasonably derogatory humor, in which the initiator attempts to make others laugh by doing or saying things at one's own expense (Martin, 2007). Dozois, Martin, and Bieling (2009) determined self-defeating humor was positively correlated with depression symptoms and "perceived deficiencies in self worth" (p. 594). Behavior of this kind clearly does not promote a positive learning climate. Thus, instructors need to be aware of distinctions between self-deprecating humor and self-defeating humor. Perhaps a wise strategy would be for instructors to ask their closest associates – family and friends – how they are perceived when they use self-deprecating humor. This feedback would help the instructor ascertain the prospects of using self-deprecating humor as an asset in the classroom.

Guidelines

Humor as a construct is very dependent on its context; the culture and context of the classroom will influence the production, purposefulness, and interpretation of joking behavior. Roth, Yap, and Short (2006) provided several guidelines for using humor in adult learning, and these guidelines connect the above theories to practice.

Know the audience. The need for a shared understanding of the humor ingredient has been previously discussed in this article -- attempts at humor must be based on concepts that the audience understands, mathematicians may refer to it as the lowest common denominator. Developing an understanding of demographics such as age, gender, culture, and language will help prevent members of the audience from feeling left out of the discussion. One common way many educators get to know their students is the use of icebreakers. Participation in and observation of icebreakers during the early stages will help the facilitator to get a feel for and knowledge of their students. If experiences within the group vary (such as a multi-cultural group), then humor should cut across the experiences, or perhaps be used to learn more about diversity and areas of difference.

One strategy is to ask students where humor may reside in a certain situation. There is great potential to explore important educational constructs such as shared understandings, individual assumptions, and exploring areas of difference by having students talk about what they share and what sets them apart from each other.

Know the setting. The organizational cultures and work values of educational settings can vary greatly. Community colleges, universities, mandatory workplace training sessions, corporate leadership seminars, etc. have differing sets of expectations and cultures. Attempts at humor that may be appropriate, purposeful, and understood in one context may be ambiguous, ill conceived, and very inappropriate in another context. One method to understand the setting is using structured activities in where students think and exert control about what type of class they want. Ask students to consider courses they enjoyed, and move towards that type of class. An example is an exercise often referred to as four corners. Students place words in each corner that reflect what type of learning experience they desire, the educator can help the students create that environment.

Be authentic. The most successful integration of humor in education comes innately -- instructors should seek to use humor strategies that

are consistent with their values, beliefs, and personality traits. Unnatural attempts at humor will most likely be recognized as being inconsistent with the instructor's normal behavior. Planned humorous interventions can be very useful (such as a cartoon inserted into a presentation) for those who want to test the waters with initial attempts at humor. Spontaneous humor arising from content and interpersonal interactions can be very effective in instructional settings; however, spontaneous humor involves elements of risk if humor is quickly used without forethought to its possible interpretations by audience members. Authenticity as an adult educator is enhanced by taking stock of one's personal epistemology, and building an awareness of self as an educator. Critical reflection and personal journaling are strategies for building this awareness of self, and thus helping one make judgments about using and improving applications of humor in teaching and learning transactions.

Understand the delivery medium and adapt humor to fit it. This strategy is especially important in today's world of adult and continuing education, given that a formal face-to-face classroom meeting is only one of many possible modes of instructional delivery. Applying humor in an online setting poses its own unique set of challenges. An instructor will have much more difficulty in assessing the 'online classroom', so to speak, to determine the mood, expectations, and engagement of the participants. Compared to face to face instruction, the instructor may need to be more systemic with humor applications, giving special thought to strengths of varying medium options, and considering possibilities for both synchronous and asynchronous environments.

Educators should purposely inject aspects of group work that have elicited humor in the past. Teachers may be well served to collect examples of humor (jokes, cartoons, and videos) that have proven successful in making good connections to the topic in the past and keep them at the ready. Consider what type of humor is trending, and consider integrating that type of humor in the classroom whether face to face or online

Be purposeful with humor applications. Instructors should be using humor to enhance learning, not simply to be entertaining. Humor should be used purposefully; it should be linked to learning strategies, intended outcomes, and the subject matter at hand (Wanzer, 2002). Humorous cartoons and videos can be used to reinforce concepts in reading materials and/or embellish class discussions. As an example, the cartoon Dilbert™ may be very useful during the examination of leadership, organizational culture, power dynamics, and a host of other workplace related topics. These cartoons can also be used to provide a mental break when the

class is tense or disengaged – perhaps because of complex course content. Garner (2006) used the subject of statistics, one feared by many students, in his examination of humor in a college course. He found content-centered humor to be effective at helping students achieve learning objectives, as well as giving students the impression that the instructor was putting forth extra effort to help students. Humor may help remedy the stress within certain classes and wake up those who are drifting off to sleep. After all, if students are laughing, they are probably not sleeping.

An example of the preceding points from my practice occurred in an online research methods course that I recently taught. I gave serious thought to a YouTube video on qualitative inquiry that lampoons the movie Downfall (2004). In it Hitler is outraged by a decision made by one of his generals and spends several minutes in a maniacal and fuming monologue. This movie scene is in German, with English subtitles. It has been the subject of numerous parodies in which the subtitles are substituted. Qualitative research, Chuck Norris is coming, Brett Favre playing for the Minnesota Vikings, and his pizza arriving late have all been topics. I find it very amusing, its sharp wit and mocking of the criticisms of qualitative research are brilliantly written. However, I understood that learners in the class may not recognize or successfully interpret the humor, even to the point of serious distress because of confusion or past associations with Nazis and World War II. In the end I elected to not post it, erring on the side of caution. Perhaps I would have used it in a face-to-face course in which it could be properly introduced and concluded with a facilitated discussion. Nonetheless, I did not feel comfortable using it in the online environment. The moral of the story is that one must be very reflective on what is presented in various instructional formats, because interpretations of humor in both face-to-face and online settings can vary greatly.

Conclusions

People use humor for a purpose, and the purposes vary greatly -- from demonstrating wittiness, gaining a negotiating advantage with a customer, or gaining status within a group. Adult educators can apply humor for the purpose of enhancing their instruction. Their best results with this purpose will occur if they understand what makes humor work – that is to say, the foundational theories of humor that have been described in this article. This article is not intended to be a primer on humor and humor theory (for such we recommend Victor Raskin's, The Primer

of Humor Research and Rod Martin's The Psychology of Humor). Rather, I ask that practitioners of adult education consider integrating humor into their practice by first focusing on the learning outcomes, and then determining the strengths of various humor applications that may best fit the learning context. Humor needs to be congruent with the course material, and not be so pronounced that it detracts from it (Berk, 2003). In the same vein that instructional technologies are merely tools that can help instructors achieve instructional goals, humor can similarly be viewed as a tool to enhance the instructional process. Humor can help students and facilitators to reduce anxiety, engage in the content, communicate important concepts, and have a more enjoyable learning experience. Similar to other instructional skills, humor for instructional purposes can be practiced and refined until instructors gain comfort and confidence with its application.

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