

Laugh and Learn: Incorporating Humor in Engineering Education

Dr Sajid Iqbal

Editor-in-Chief IEEEEP Journal, PITAC & TEVTA Master Trainer
sajidiqbal62@gmail.com

“Humor can be an effective way to engage students and activate learning” [1].

In the past fifty years, humor's role in teaching has gained widespread attention. This editorial advocates for utilizing humor as a pedagogical tool to cultivate a positive classroom environment. It offers insights and strategies for engineering and technology faculty to seamlessly integrate humor into courses. The author, drawing from extensive experience as a teacher, presenter, and trainer, emphasizes humor's ability to boost interest in various subjects.

A perpetual challenge for teachers, myself included, is enhancing student learning. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, most university faculty lack formal teaching training. Consequently, instructors are left to figure out engaging teaching methods independently, resorting to trial and error or adopting techniques from experienced colleagues. Classroom dullness can extinguish student interest, undermining the desire for further study. Regrettably, students often perceive classes as boring, challenging, and stressful [2]. A survey of more than 250,000 freshmen at the US universities indicated a 30-year record high 36 percent of the students said they were frequently bored in class [3].

Prof. Deiter rightly said, “Economics professors, who sometimes lecture on monopoly, apparently don't have a monopoly on giving boring lectures [2].”



Fig. 1 “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”
—Victor Borge.

Effective teaching requires expertise and a positive learning environment. Teachers maintain competence through continuous reading and research in their discipline. But teachers don't have to be overly serious to succeed. Teaching is a serious job, but being serious doesn't mean being solemn; one can discuss serious matters and inject humor simultaneously as shown in Fig. 1.

Great teachers stand out by creating inspiring, exciting, and imaginative classrooms. Humor, a versatile tool adaptable to various teaching styles, can add humor to your classroom, fostering excitement and inspiring students. The author has observed an increase in student participation and engagement after incorporating humor into his courses. This demonstrates humor's potential as a powerful tool for fostering a positive learning environment. While no

substitute for substance, humor is a teaching tool that can create a more positive and enjoyable environment that promotes class attendance and student learning [2].

Instructors often hesitate to use humor due to certain myths. These misconceptions contribute to their reluctance [2]:

- 1) Some view teaching as serious, disapproving of humor as frivolous and undignified, considering it a waste of time.
- 2) Humor is often perceived as telling jokes or physical comedy, which is not part of curriculum.
- 3) Professors need to have professional comedian skills to use humor, lacking proper training.

As comedian Steve Allen has observed, "what is funny is a matter of personal opinion". Humor, like beauty, is in the eyes and ears of the beholder. Humor is described by the Penguin English Dictionary as, the 'Capacity for seeing the funny side of things, cheerful and good-tempered amusement.' In a broader sense, it is the attitude and behavior of those who are naturally inclined to joke about everything. It may be furthermore widely qualified as the ability to be witty or hilarious, the skill to provoke laughter in others [4].

Different types of humor includes, humor related to class material, funny stories, humorous comments, self-deprecating humor, unplanned humor, jokes, riddles, puns, funny props and visual illustrations [5]. What is humorous is subjective and varies from person to person. And different people find different things funny, thus every teacher has the potential to promote a positive learning environment using humor.

Neuroscience research reveals that humor systematically activates the brain's dopamine reward system [6], and cognitive studies show that dopamine is important for both goal-oriented motivation and long-term memory [7], while research indicates that appropriately-used humor can be an effective intervention to improve retention in students of all ages. A substantial body of research explains why we remember things that make us laugh, like our favorite, hilarious moment or the details of that funny movie we saw last weekend [8].



Fig. 2 Using humor in the classroom [1]

The National Education Association (NEA) advocates that teachers can use humor to bring content to life— through games, parody, or comical voices (or wigs or hats) to bring meaning to content as shown in Fig. 2 [1]. Some teachers use humor as part of their lesson plans, bringing in funny examples of their subject matter. Prof. Maurice Elias suggests creating bulletin boards for funny quotes and illustrations shared by teacher and students, placing humorous items on exams and assignments, encouraging students to bring in jokes for transition periods, and asking students to discuss some of their favorite comedic books [9].

The use of humor in the classroom has been researched extensively and has been shown to have many benefits for students [10]. Humor enhances an instructor's likability, professional image, and teaching effectiveness. Proper use of humor and stand-up comedy can elevate the student's educational experience, creating a positive classroom environment. Humor serves key functions in entertaining, influencing, and animating the atmosphere. Students respond positively to relevant, positive, and well-delivered humor in the classroom. Humor facilitates active learning.

Prof. Azhar Hussan Shah, who was my teacher at UET and later became my senior colleague at UCP, once shared the idea that a teacher is also an actor. Although I initially disagreed, now I fully endorse his perspective. Similarly, my UET session fellow, Mr. Akram, recounted how Dr. K. E. Durrani, a beloved teacher, captivated his class with personal anecdotes and life experiences woven into his lectures [11]. Dr. Durrani's enthusiasm and engagement undoubtedly contributed to his students' enjoyment and learning. These examples demonstrate that we shouldn't bore our students but rather, as the editorial underscores, actively incorporate humor and real-life experiences to enhance their learning.

Humor is learnable [12].

Online courses such as "Comedy and Humor in the Classroom" offer valuable insights and skills for educators. Humor comes across as a kind of magic. It is high time to take humor seriously. Anthropologist Edward Hall rightly said: "If you can learn the humor of a people, and really control it, you know that you are also in control of nearly everything else [13]."

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The Writer's Journey: Insights from Major Quotes

- I. "The first draft is just you telling yourself the story." - Terry Pratchett
- II. "Write drunk, edit sober." - Often attributed to Ernest Hemingway
- III. "Easy reading is damn hard writing." - Nathaniel Hawthorne
- IV. "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." - Maya Angelou
- V. "Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go." - E.L. Doctorow
- VI. "I write to give myself strength. I write to be the characters that I am not. I write to explore all the things I'm afraid of." - Joss Whedon
- VII. "Words can be like X-rays if you use them properly – they'll go through anything. You read and you're pierced." - Aldous Huxley
- VIII. "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass." - Anton Chekhov
- IX. "The scariest moment is always just before you start." - Stephen King
- X. "A professional writer is an amateur who didn't quit." - Richard Bach