Teaching with Humor: Improving Pedagogy, Teaching Skills, and Reaching Students

CETLA
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Darian Unger
Assistant Professor
Howard University
School of Business
Outline

• Why this presentation is not allowed to be remotely fun or humorous
• Why humor and engagement actually matter
  – The three R’s...but they’re different from what you think
• How to make it work
  – Sources and examples
• Avoiding pitfalls
• Q&A and discussion
Why this won’t be funny

• Books about and analyses of humor are never actually funny
• I am neither Chris Rock nor Jerry Seinfeld

Actual funny guy           Actual funny guy           Just a professor

• I need to set expectations low
Why this will be useful

• Humor is engaging in several ways
  – In lectures
  – On slides
  – In exams
  – On Blackboard

• Engagement strengthens teaching
  – Strong teaching indirectly drives greater learning and mastery of skills

• Engagement strengthens learning and performance
Misconceptions

• Humor is incompatible with serious learning

• Humor is natural and spontaneous

• Funny is fluffy

• Too difficult, especially if students don’t get it
Misconceptions

• Humor is incompatible with serious learning
  – No it isn’t

• Humor is natural and spontaneous
  – No it isn’t

• Funny is fluffy
  – No, it isn’t

• Too difficult, especially if students don’t get it
  – No, it isn’t
The three R’s: What Helps Students Learn a Subject

• **Relevance**
  – Importance to students, applicability of subject material
  – Connecting subject material to life
  – Value to them of what they’re studying

• **Relationship**
  – Students learn best when they feel noticed, welcomed, and valued

• **Rigor**
  – Not just more volume or more work
  – An outcome of a carefully designed class with expert teaching that pushes students to new level
  – Deepens and extends student thinking about tasks central to the discipline
Humor for relevance

• Examples
  – Using common, all-too human instances of morning activities
  – Using common objects
Humor to aid relationships

• Examples
  – Self-deprecating humor…making fun of yourself as a professor is bound to strike a chord
  – Making fun of a common annoyance
  – Identifying with a common problem
  – Including a common, silly item
Humor in Class Management

• Examples
  – Being late to class
  – Texting in class
Misconceptions

• Humor is incompatible with serious learning
  – Physiologically and psychologically helpful
  – Can increase retention and reduce tension

• Humor is natural and spontaneous
  – Much of it is planned and stored

• Funny is fluffy
  – It can include serious and complex topics

• Too difficult, especially if students don’t get it
  – Anyone can plan it…and it’s not a fine art
Other thoughts

• De-stressing tests and assessments
• Role in active learning and spurring discussions
• Starting off on the right foot
Avoiding pitfalls

• Students will be funnier than you
• Don’t try to out-culture your students…they’ll beat you every time
• Stay away from any possible misinterpretations…they’re not funny they’re not worth it, and they will distance you from your students
  – Put-downs, obscenity, vulgarity, crude jokes
• Allow comebacks and reactions
Final thoughts

• Humor is engaging in several ways
  – In lecture
  – On slides
  – In exams
  – On Blackboard

• Engagement strengthens teaching
  – Strong teaching indirectly drives greater learning and mastery of skills

• Engagement strengthens learning and performance
References


Questions and ideas?