

## A Review of Humor in Educational Settings: Four Decades of Research

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*The primary goal of this project is to provide a summary of extant research regarding humor in the classroom, with an emphasis on identifying and explaining inconsistencies in research findings and offering new directions for future studies in this area. First, the definitions, functions, and main theories of humor are reviewed. Next, the paper explains types of humorous instructional communication. Third, the empirical findings of both the source and receiver perspectives are reviewed. Finally, this paper concludes with advice for educators and suggests potential future research directions for scholars.*

*Keywords:* Humor; Instructional Communication; Learning

In Season 14, Episode 7 of *The Simpsons*, members of the selection committee for a teaching award watch videotapes of applicants. After watching a teacher perform a series of rapid, Robin Williams-like, humorous impressions that are seemingly irrelevant to the class material, a committee member exclaims, "Dead Poets Society has ruined a generation of educators!" Although the quote may not unequivocally demonstrate why *The Simpsons* has earned the reputation as "the most important cultural institution of our time" (Turner, 2004, p. 5), it does raise an important question for instructional communication scholars and education professionals, namely: How does humor influence the education process? This is an issue that scholars of instructional communication have devoted substantial research attention.

Contrary to *The Simpsons* quote above, a number of scholars have advocated that teachers incorporate humor into their classrooms (Berk, 1996; Berk & Nada, 1998; Brown, 1995; Cornett, 1986; Davies & Apter, 1980; Johnson, 1990; Kher, Molstad, &

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### *Humor Orientation*

When considering how humor is used, researchers have found that some people have a predisposition to be funny, known as humor orientation (S. Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). Humor orientation is considered to be a communication-based personality trait wherein those high in humor orientation have a predisposition to enact humorous messages and perceive themselves as successfully funny across many different situations (M. Booth-Butterfield et al., 2007; S. Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995). Humor orientation is about the ability to produce humorous messages, not the ability to appreciate humor. High-humor oriented instructors are thought to have a more developed and complex schema of humor and hence, they have a wider repertoire of humorous communication behaviors to enact. Wanzer et al. (2010) found that high-humor orientation professors used significantly more humor than professors low in humor orientation. Additionally, Wanzer et al. found that more humorous professors used more varied types of humor, including more offensive, other-disparaging, self-disparaging, relevant, and irrelevant humor than less funny professors. These findings are similar to those of Frymier et al. (2008), who found that perceived instructor humor orientation was positively correlated with many different inappropriate humor behaviors. It may be the case that instructors high in humor orientation may be able to use inappropriate humor in the classroom without offending students because they are more skilled or because they are better able to establish a joking friendliness with their students (Frymier et al., 2008; Wanzer et al., 2010).

Humor orientation should assist instructors in relating to students better. Indeed, Aylor and Opplinger (2003) reported that humor orientation, and its ability to reduce psychological distance, also related to student-teacher interactions outside of the classroom. In their study, students who perceived their instructors as high in humor orientation were more likely to initiate, and be satisfied with, out-of-class communication with their instructor. Further, students were more likely to discuss their personal problems with their high-humor oriented instructors, which students reported helped foster meaningful teacher-student interpersonal relationships. The ability of humor to potentially create closeness between students and teachers relates to immediacy, which is addressed next.

### *Immediacy*

The term immediacy refers to messages that convey warmth, closeness, and involvement among interactants (Mehrabian, 1971). The purpose of immediacy is to create a more positive interaction between sender and receiver by signaling approach and availability, inducing positive psychological arousal, and conveying interpersonal closeness (J.F. Andersen, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; P.A. Andersen & J.F. Andersen, 2005). Rubin and Martin (1994) described immediacy as a person's ability to show the individuals around them that they are open for communication, both verbally and nonverbally.

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### *Types of Humor Used in the Classroom*

Several classification taxonomies have been created to address the types of humor used in classrooms (Bryant et al., 1979; Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Nussbaum, 1984; Wanzer et al., 2010). The taxonomies vary in the number of categories of humor, with the simplest ones classifying humor broadly into *positive* or *negative* types based on the function that the humor appears to serve. Martin et al. (2003) introduced a model of humor styles that categorizes humor use into generally positive or affiliative, and tendentious or aggressive uses of humor. Affiliative humor is aimed at amusing others, building friendships, or reducing tension. The goal of affiliative humor is to enhance liking and cohesiveness. Aggressive humor involves manipulating or denigrating others, and can be seen in ridicule, mocking, and other forms of disparaging humor. Similarly, Sala, Krupat and Roter (2002) also categorized humor along positive and negative dimensions in physician-patient interviews, but they also added a category for irony and tension-releasing humor, which is not easily identified as positive or negative.

Consistent with the idea that humor can be meaningfully categorized along positive, negative, and general dimensions, Hay (2000) identified three functions of humor among friends: solidarity-based humor, humor to serve psychological needs, and power-based humor. Solidarity-based humor involves building solidarity among group members to create consensus. Some techniques used include sharing personal experiences, highlighting similarities through shared experiences, or clarifying and maintaining boundaries. Humor serving psychological needs is used to defend oneself or cope with problems arising in the conversation. Power-based humor serves to maintain boundaries between ingroup and outgroup members, to raise the status of the humorist, to foster conflict with another, and to influence or control the conversational partner. These three functions could be relevant in the classroom as well because instructors can use humor to create solidarity with their students, cope with problems in the classroom, or raise their own status.

Some scholars have used inductive analytic techniques to further classify humor types used in the classroom. Using a sample of 712 student-generated examples of appropriate teacher humor, Wanzer et al. (2006) reduced them to four main types with 26 subtypes. The four main types included humor related to class material, humor unrelated to class material, self-disparaging humor, and unplanned humor. Frymier et al. (2008) conducted a factor-analysis of the Wanzer et al. types that resulted in five major categories: other-disparaging, related, unrelated, offensive, and self-disparaging. Frymier et al. further found that using relevant humor to demonstrate course concepts was generally the most appropriate type of humor for instructors. Not surprisingly, humor that disparages others or is offensive because it targets religious or ethnic groups was seen as the least appropriate for the classroom (see Table 1).

Rather than classifying humor types by their function, other researchers have created taxonomies based on the general form of the humor. Martin (2007) argued that humor can be divided into three broad forms: jokes, which are context-free

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Table 1 Humor types

Humor type	Description	Representative work	Appropriateness for classroom
Affiliative; Solidarity-based	Amusing others, building solidarity, relieving tension	Hay (2000); Martin et al. (2003)	Appropriate
Psychological needs/Self-Enhancing	Humor used to defend oneself, regulate emotions, or cope with problems that arise during the interaction	Hay (2000); Martin et al. (2003)	Appropriate
Power-based humor	Establish boundaries and create status differences	Hay (2000)	Appropriate
Humor related to class material	Stories, jokes, or other humorous content related to class material	Cornett (1986); Frymier et al. (2008); Kaplan and Pascoe (1977); Wanzer et al. (2006)	Appropriate
Funny stories	Events or activities connected in a single event related as a tale	Bryant et al. (1979); Bryant et al. (1980)	Appropriate
Humorous comments	A brief statement with a humorous element	Bryant et al. (1979)	Appropriate
Seeking funny others	Encouraging humor use in others or seeking out other people known to be funny	Wanzer et al. (2005); Cornett (1986)	Appropriate
Humor unrelated to class material	Stories, jokes, or other humorous content not related to class material	Frymier et al. (2008); Wanzer et al. (2006)	Context-dependent
Self-disparaging humor	Making one's self the target of the humor	Bryant and Zillmann (1989); Cornett (1986); Frymier and Thompson (1992); Frymier et al. (2008); Wanzer et al. (2006)	Context-dependent
Unplanned humor	Humor that is unintentional or spontaneous	Martin (2007); Wanzer et al. (2006)	Context-dependent
Jokes or Riddles	Build-up followed by a punchline	Bryant et al. (1979, 1980); Martin (2007); Ziv (1988)	Context-dependent

Table 1 (Continued)

Humor type	Description	Representative work	Appropriateness for classroom
Puns	Structurally or phonetically words or phrases having two or more meanings were used simultaneously to play on the multiple meanings	Bryant et al. (1979)	Context-dependent
Low humor	Acting silly, stupid, or absurd in specific situations	Wanzer et al. (2005)	Context-dependent
Nonverbal humor	Using gestures, funny facial expressions, vocal tones, etc. for humorous intent	Wanzer et al. (2005)	Context-dependent
Impersonation	Doing impressions or mimicking voices of famous characters	Wanzer et al. (2005)	Context-dependent
Language or word play	Witty or clever verbal communication including using slang or sarcasm	Wanzer et al. (2005)	Context-dependent
Laughing	Laughing or varying intensity as a means to make others laugh	Wanzer et al. (2005)	Context-dependent
Using funny props	Using funny props such as cartoons, water pistols, funny cards, etc.	Wanzer et al. (2005)	Context-dependent
Visual illustrations	Use of pictures or items expected to promote humor	Bryant et al. (1981)	Context-dependent
Humorous Distortions Test items	Use of irony or comical exaggerations Using items on tests and assessments that contain humor	Bryant and Zillmann (1989) Ziv (1988)	Context-dependent Context-dependent
Aggressive; Other-denigrating	Manipulating or denigrating others, ridicule, or mocking	Frymier et al. (2008); Gorham and Christophel (1990); Martin et al. (2003); Stuart and Rosenfeld (1994)	Inappropriate
Offensive humor	Humor based on the race, ethnicity, sex, political affiliation, or sexual orientation of another	Frymier et al. (2008)	Inappropriate