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Rolling in the Stacks Laughing: Opportunities for Research on the Use of Humor in Library Instruction

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ROLLING IN THE STACKS LAUGHING:

Opportunities for Research on the Use of Humor in Library Instruction

Jessica Swaringen, MLS & Kevin Reagan, MSIS

ABSTRACT

The use of humor in academic instruction has a long but contradictory history. Some studies imply a positive correlation between humor and student learning, whereas others adamantly maintain the opposite. Moreover, studies on the use of humor during instruction rarely include librarians, whose humor could be misunderstood or missed due to student library anxiety or lack of rapport. This presentation proposes methods by which humor in library instruction sessions can be better researched and evaluated.

HUMOR IN INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXTS

While there is no dearth of scholarly literature on the use of humor in the college classroom, there are few studies on the use of humor in one-shot library instruction sessions. For instance, on ProQuest Central, the following search query yields 303 search results (with an added filter of publications in English):



(MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Teaching methods") OR
MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Educational philosophy") OR
MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Teaching") OR
MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Reflective teaching") OR
MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Pedagogy")) AND
MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Humor")

Conversely, the same search query only yields seven results on ProQuest's Library Science Database, and that is merely a ProQuest search. Nonetheless, despite the great number of studies on humor's effectiveness in the classroom, conclusions are inconsistent and contingent on the vicissitudes of sample sizes and instruments. Furthermore, while academic library literature recommends the use of humor in the classroom (Walker 2006), consideration is rarely given to the fact that instruction librarians typically teach one-shot sessions. Nonetheless, Perret (2016) addresses the uniqueness of humor in one-shots, though the focus is on how librarians feel about the use of humor, not the impact it has on learning outcomes. By systematically reviewing and analyzing salient literature, the authors seek to understand the limitations of studies on the use of humor in the library classroom, develop and employ a research-informed instrument, and allay the lack of attention given to the use of humor in library instruction sessions.

TRENDS IN THE LITERATURE



Perceptions of using instructional humor

- Many existing studies on the subject of instructional humor investigate how such humor is perceived; most often how it is perceived by students, but sometimes how instructors perceive themselves as well.
- Instructional humor can humanize librarians to their students and facilitate a better librarian-student connection. For example, Cooper et. al (2018) found that undergraduate students reported they appreciate when instructors use humor in the classroom, and that when the instructor's jokes are funny, they are more likely to
 - pay attention
 - find the instructor reliable
 - have a sense of belonging in the class

Effects of instructional humor on student learning

- The majority of experimental studies on the subject of instructional humor focus on how it may affect student learning, including cognition, memory, and retention. Far and away, the majority of these studies focus on semester-long course instruction.
- Out of the 13 articles in the review that report on student learning, only two studies found that humor had a negative effect; far and away, the results of instructional humor had a positive effect on student learning, but only if the humor met certain criteria.
- In a 2018 meta-analysis of the effects of humor on persuasion, Walter, Cody, Xu, and Murphy found that humor has a positive, moderate-level effect on comprehension, and that these effects were most positive when the humor was related to the topic at hand. The analysis also found that irony and satire had a negative effect on knowledge comprehension; thus, it is recommended that librarians avoid these styles of humor in instructional settings.

Effects of instructional humor on student behavior

- Many experimental studies on instructional humor have focused on student behaviors, instead of or in addition to student learning. Some of the behaviors assessed include paying attention, in-class participation, and seeking help outside of class.
- 4 out of 5 studies identified mostly positive effects of humor on student behavior, while the remaining study identified no significant effects. Generally speaking, if your instructional humor follows best practices, students will be more likely to participate in discussions, seek additional help, and be more willing to return to the library.

BEST PRACTICES

- DO use humor relevant to the instructional content
- DON'T use inappropriate humor, such as confrontational, disparaging, or sarcastic humor
- Tread lightly with satire and self-deprecating humor as well
- DO plan ahead when using humor; it just has to appear spontaneous
- DON'T give up – humor orientation predicts who has a "knack" for humor, but anyone can be funny in the classroom with practice!

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- There is neither a uniform nor standardized method to measure humor and its effectiveness, though there are several studies that provide ways to measure humor. Even if a standard existed, it would unlikely be useful for the library classroom, given that many librarians teach one-shot sessions. One important takeaway is for librarians to develop a tool to measure humor.
- A second takeaway is to study the way in which familiarity with an instructor impacts humor's reception and effectiveness. Moreover, in the review, we found that gender differences in instructional humor is an area of opportunity. While many of our sources have acknowledged gender as a complicating factor in how instructional humor is received, only 3 articles deliberately delve into the question of how instructor gender affects how humor attempts are received by students.
- Finally, instructional humor in the online classroom is another area worthy of study. Out of the 33 sources reviewed thus far, only 4 of them deliberately investigate using instructional humor in the online classroom. Literature about this particular intersection of study is likely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where many instructors used to being funny in the traditional classroom had to figure out how to translate that personality into a digital environment.



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