

An Investigation of Humor Based Teaching and Student Learning: Case of Higher Education

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Abstract

Humor-based teaching is gaining an increased attention from academicians and researchers all over the world. However, its outcomes and contextual factors which make it effective or ineffective are still not clear due to the limited research in this domain. In the present study, the focus is on understanding the effects of humor-based teaching in the university setting. The study utilized a cross-sectional method for data collection and a quantitative approach for data analysis. Data is collected from students in the graduation program in a higher educational institute in Oman. The key findings of the study are that out of three dimensions of humor-based teaching, psychological comfort significantly influences students' academic performance measured in terms of semester GPA and CGPA. The findings highlight that humor-based teaching is important and needs to be given greater attention in this context.

Keywords: Humor, Teaching, Higher Education, Oman.

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

Humour is not at all a new phenomenon. It is a biological attribute that all humans possess (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006). Since ancient Greek times, numerous theories have attempted to explain humor and its various applications and functions, including its sociological, psychological, philosophical, and linguistic features (Dyner, 2009). This theory, first developed by Spencer (1860), was made famous by Freud (1960/1905). Many people may fear or find it difficult or uncomfortable to discuss certain subjects. Humor gives these people a socially acceptable way to relieve their tension about these sensitive areas. Laughter can be used as a substitute for violent behavior and thus help people avoid conflict and solve many issues. Hence, its utility in educational institutes can be vast.

It is not new to consider the instructive power of humor. Both Plato and Aristotle, through their superiority theories, saw the benefit of wit as a social corrective, although they remained suspicious of the uneducated laughter of the masses (Plato in Morreall

1987; Aristotle in Morreall 1987). The contribution that humor makes to student learning is an issue of great interest. Research shows that humor itself does not cause learning but it does create an environment conducive to learning. It relaxes the learners, removes stress, and makes it easier for students and teachers to connect at a personal level. The presence of humor in a classroom makes the environment very positive (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006).

Humour and Education

Using humor in teaching and learning processes may create an enjoyable environment conducive to learning. It may improve students' proficiency, increase their span of attention and reduce class monotony. It entertains learners and this entertainment develops inherent motivation which is essentially in teaching any subject. Students also become more active participants in the classroom if the content is humorously presented to them. Besides this, humor helps to illustrate as well as reinforce what is being taught. Further, humor enables students to express themselves freely without stress and embarrassment or fear to become an object of ridicule from classmates. Thus, humor, along with

encouragement and praise should be one of the many useful teaching aids used by teachers to make their classrooms more inviting and contribute to learning (Afghari & Allami, 2007).

Humor is a powerful force. It can encourage an atmosphere of openness, develop students' divergent thinking, improve their retention of the presented materials, and garner respect for the teacher. Laughter isn't just the best medicine, it's a valuable teaching tool as well. (Garner, 2006).

In his article, "Humor in Pedagogy: How Haha Can Lead to Aha!" by Garner attempted to answer the questions related to the impact of humor on making education effective. Garner performed an experiment looking at the effects of humor in asynchronous distance learning and discusses the merits and hazards of using comedy to teach. He concluded that like most things in life, it needs to be used in moderation.

Too much humor can result in a loss of respect and inappropriate jokes or jokes at the students' expense can create a hostile classroom environment. Despite the availability of some literature on this issue, no serious attempt has been made to analyze the impact of humor or jokes from a pedagogical perspective, especially in the Gulf where most teachers are expats who teach the Arabic-speaking population. The current study is an attempt to find out what type of humor can be effectively used in classrooms of universities in Oman as a relief maker for teachers and students both. The present study aims to examine the suitability and effectiveness of verbal humor. The study put forward the following objectives.

Objectives

The objective of the study is to test the effects of humor on students' academic achievement. More specifically, the objectives of the study include;

- To test the effects of psychological comfort on students' academic performance.
- To test the effects of fun learning on students' academic performance.
- To test the effects of the learning environment on students' academic performance.

Scope of study

The study is restricted to the higher education institutes and graduate-level students in Oman.

Significance of the Study

The study makes two important contributions. The first contribution is contextual since literature is scarce about humor in the Omani higher education context. Hence, the study fills this literature gap and makes this important theoretical contribution. The second contribution is practical as the findings of the study can be used to make important adjustments in the teaching style to improve students learning and overall

academic performance. The findings can be used by the management of the higher educational institutes and future researchers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humor is considered an ideal tool and is in practice since ancient times. For example, as Talmud relates that before Rabbah (4th Century CE) began lecturing his student, he would first say something funny which will make students laugh, and afterwards, he will begin his lecture (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 30b). Friedman, Friedman, and Amoo (2002) suggest that humor can be used to teach difficult subjects such as statistics or mathematics. It is a useful tool since it de-stress students and brings the tutor and students closer (Berk & Nanda, 1998; Burkhart, 1998).

Humor can be classified in many ways such as by medium of communication, by style (such as farcical versus tragi-comical), or by formal structure (for instance mime versus stand-up comedy). Different type of verbal humor includes comic anecdotes, puns, quips, and jokes. Visual humor can also be used in class and include cartoons (single frames, captioned and uncaptioned, and so on), caricatures, and pictorial pastiche. Sensory jokes are also a type of humor and may include olfactory jokes, tickling, and pranks. Thus, there are many instances of humor which can be combined with several different formal and stylistic features. Humor can also be categorized by a particular content or a topic. Some examples of themes universal in humor include jokes about stupidity, jokes about the mother-in-law, political satire, trickster tales and so on (Davis, 2013).

Humor in the classroom is important since it creates a learning-conducive environment and improves the retention of material (Halula, 2013; Henderson, 2015). It enables a relaxed classroom atmosphere with less stress and less fear among the students (Halula, 2013). The benefit of appropriately using humor is that it reinforces concepts and improves retention (Henderson, 2015). Furthermore, studies suggest that it can create a sense of immediacy and connection between teacher and student which reduce anxiety and increase enjoyment, and interest in the class (Berk & Nanda, 1998; Wanzer, 2002). Educators can utilize humor's systematic activation of the dopamine reward system to reinforce the brain's pathways to new knowledge. Furthermore, humor is also found to be linked to increased memorability (McDaniel, Dornburg, & Guynn, 2005; Strick, Holland, van Baaren, & Van Knippenberg, 2010). The studies have also shown that the use of humor can increase higher classroom achievement by meticulously constructing a curriculum using humor that is relevant to the topic and not simply an entertaining sidebar (Suzuki & Heath, 2014). Based on our discussion so far, it can be argued that humor in education is a valid concept and need further attention.

Next, we discuss some of the specific studies which show the advantages of using humor in class.

Banas, Dunbar, Shriebe, & Rodriguez, (2011) conducted a study on humor and education based on survey research. It presents four goals that instructors should consider while implementing humor in their classrooms. The findings show that when instructors use positive and appropriate humor, students' feelings about the classroom change as they perceive the class as an interesting and relaxed environment. The study also reports that humor can improve students' recall of some concepts.

A study by Kumar & Dhiman (2019) explored different types of humor that lecturers use in relation to three dominant theories of humor including the superiority, incongruity, and relief theory. The study is based on the observation method of data collection from five award-winning lecturers in a university in New Zealand identified by students as having a good sense of humor in the classroom. The researcher made use of the observation method accompanied by interviews using the stimulated recall interview method to understand their reflection-in-action concerning specific humorous moments and specific humorous behaviors while teaching. Based on data, seven types of humor were identified to enhance students learning or gain their attention. The study is highly significant as it provides a useful perspective on the use of humor in the higher education context.

Polio (2001) argues that humor in the classroom is useful and recommends associating humor with personal life and its use in stories. He also suggests trying humor in the course material.

Powers (2005) identified the proper use of acting out in the classroom and using the instructor as the main source of comic relief for the students. The author suggests guidelines regarding the use of humor during the lecture to generate discussion, add energy to the classroom and avoid boredom among the tutors.

Wanzer (2002) suggests that a balanced approach should be used for the effective use of good humor and to prevent distasteful humor. Wanzer (2002) further suggest that since college instructors are perceived as role model, therefore, they should use humor carefully and avoid insulting or sarcasm-related humor.

Friedman and Friedman (2019) offer several examples of positive humor as it can serve as a useful teaching tool to reduce stress among the staff and students. Furthermore, it can make attendees receptive to serious subjects such as social justice or statistical analysis. It can also tie people together, give psychological strength to victims, and enable them to rise above despair and hopelessness. Humor can also enhance teamwork in the workplace. However, the

author recommends avoiding the wrong kind of humor which can cause harm. Based on the merits of humor learning, we propose that humor-based learning can enhance students' academic performance since it has the power to improve students learning. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses.

H1: Psychological comfort has a significant positive effect on students' academic performance.

H2: Fun learning has a significant positive effect on students' academic performance.

H3: Learning environment has a significant positive effect on students' academic performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study utilizes the cross-sectional method for data collection. By nature, the study is quantitative and explanatory. It is quantitative since data collection and analysis is based on closed-ended survey questions and statistical method for data analysis. It is also explanatory since it attempts to explain the relationship between independent and dependent variables.

Population and Sampling

The population of the study includes Graduate level students of a selected higher educational institute from Oman. The sample consists of 100 students selected randomly.

Data Collection

The questionnaire for humor-based teaching is adapted from AbdAli, Ashur, Ghazi, & Muslim (2016) consisting of 21 statements. The Exploratory Factor Analysis was performed using the Varimax rotation to identify the three dimensions of the humor-based teaching concept. The three dimensions were labeled as psychological comfort, fun learning, and learning environment. Student's academic performance is measured using the Semester GPA and CGPA. Data is collected by using the Google form and circulating the link to the target individuals.

Data Analysis

Data once collected is checked for errors and missing values. Tool for analysis included frequency analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis performed using the SPSS version 22.

Ethical Issues

Since the study involves human subjects so ethical guidelines from the academic community were followed. Accordingly, no personal information is obtained and the objectives of the study are informed to the students. Furthermore, no incentive or coercion method is used for subjects to participate in the study and all participation is voluntary. Data is only collected for the purpose of this study and is not handed over to any other organization for any other purpose.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Results

	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	39	48.1
Female	42	51.9
Age		
18 to 20	36	44.4
21 to 24	42	51.9
Above 30	3	3.7

Source: Study Data

Table 1 shows the demographic of the participants. Accordingly, a total of 81 respondents participated in the survey. Out of the total, 39 participants were male (48.1%) and 42 participants were female (51.9%). In terms of age, 36 participants belonged to the age group of 18 to 20 years (44.4%); 42 participants belonged to the 21 to 24 years age group (51.9%), and 3 participants belonged to the above 30 years age group (3.7%).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	Number of Items	Cronbach Alpha	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Psychological Comfort	10	.944	1.70	5.00	4.1255	.89660
Fun Learning	03	.867	1.67	5.00	4.0000	1.06066
Learning Environment	07	.954	1.57	5.00	4.1164	.95994
Semester GPA	01	n/a	1.12	4.46	3.2574	.66800
CGPA	01	n/a	1.17	4.00	3.4011	.69999

Source: Study Data

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and reliability statistics. The Cronbach alpha is used to test the reliability of the questionnaire. All variables have Cronbach alpha above 0.70 so it is an indication of satisfactory reliability. The mean value indicates that the respondents had a higher level of psychological

comfort (M=4.12, SD=.89); fun learning (M=4.0, SD=1.06); and learning environment (M=4.11, SD=.95). Furthermore, the respondent's average semester GPA (M=3.25, SD=.66); and CGPA (M=3.40, SD=.69) are above average.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

		1	2	3	4	5
Psychological Comfort	Pearson Correlation	1	.915**	.969**	.629**	.668**
Fun Learning	Pearson Correlation		1	.886**	.563**	.652**
Learning Environment	Pearson Correlation			1	.602**	.615**
Semester GPA	Pearson Correlation				1	.433**
CGPA	Pearson Correlation					1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Study Data

Table 3 shows the correlation analysis and indicates that our independent variables are positively and significantly associated with Semester GPA including psychological comfort (r=.629, P<.05); fun learning (r=.563, P<.05); and learning environment (r=.602, P<.05). Similarly, all variables are positively and significantly correlated with CGPA including psychological comfort (r=.668, P<.05); fun learning

(r=.652, P<.05); and learning environment (r=.615, P<.05).

Regression Model 1: Effects of Humor on Student Semester GPA

The first regression model tests the effects of humor-based teaching on students' Semester GPA. The results are as follows;

Table 4: Effects of Humor based Teaching on Student Semester GPA

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.284	.288		4.453	.000
Psychological Comfort	.622	.308	.835	2.017	.047
Fun Learning	-.049	.138	-.078	-.358	.721
Learning Environment	-.096	.251	-.138	-.383	.703
R=.631					
Rsquare= .398					
Fstat=16.99 (.000)					
a. Dependent Variable: SemesterGPA					

Table 4 shows the result for the first regression model. Accordingly, the R-square value shows that the independent variables of humor-based teaching dimensions explain a 39.8% variation in the student Semester GPA. The model is highly fit and significant ($F_{stat}=16.99$, $P<.05$). Furthermore, the beta coefficient values show that psychological comfort has positive and significant effects on students' semester GPA ($\beta=.622$, $P<.05$); while the result for fun learning ($\beta=-.049$, $P>.05$); and learning environment ($\beta=-.096$,

$P<.05$) turned out to be insignificant. Based on the result, it can be concluded that psychological comfort is one of the most influencing factors associated with humor-based teaching.

Regression Model 2: Effects of Humor on Student CGPA

The second regression model tests the effects of humor-based teaching on students' GGPA. The results are as follows;

Table 5: Effects of Humor based Teaching on Student CGPA

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.264	.283		4.471	.000
Psychological Comfort	.744	.302	.953	2.462	.016
Fun Learning	.166	.135	.252	1.230	.222
Learning Environment	-.388	.246	-.532	-1.579	.118
R=.688					
Rsquare=.473					
Fstat=23.05 (.000)					
Dependent Variable: CGPA					

Table 5 shows the result for the second regression model. Accordingly, the R-square value shows that the independent variables of humor-based teaching dimensions explain 68.8% variation in the student CGPA. The model is highly fit and significant ($F_{stat}=23.05$, $P<.05$). Furthermore, the beta coefficient values show that psychological comfort has positive and significant effects on students' CGPA ($\beta=.744$, $P<.05$); while the result for fun learning ($\beta=.166$, $P>.05$); and learning environment ($\beta=-.388$, $P<.05$) turned out to be insignificant. Based on the result, we accept H1 and reject H2 and H3.. Overall, it can be concluded that the humor-based teaching method improves students' psychological comfort which influences student academic performance.

DISCUSSION

The focus of the study was to test the effects of the humor-based teaching method on students' academic performance. The study utilized the survey-based method for data collection and the quantitative approach for data analysis. The key findings of the study are that out of three dimensions of humor-based teaching, psychological comfort has a significant influence on students' academic performance. The findings are similar to the findings of other studies including Berk and Nanda (1998); and Henderson (2015). Especially the findings that humor-based teaching can create a psychologically safe environment in the classroom that facilitates students learning are similar to the other studies which also reported similar benefits of humor-based teaching (e.g. Halula, 2013; Friedman & Friedman, 2019; Kumar & Dhiman, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The key findings of the study include a high and positive correlation between the semester GPA of

students and their psychological comfort, fun learning, and learning environment. Humor-based teaching dimensions explain 39.8% variation in the student Semester GPA. Psychological comfort has positive and significant effects on students' semester GPA while the result for fun learning; and learning environment turned out to be insignificant. Based on the result, it can be concluded that psychological comfort is one of the most influencing factors associated with humor-based teaching. Hence we can conclude that the humor-based teaching method improves students' psychological comfort which influences student academic performance. Hence humor can be said to be an important ingredient in the classroom teaching-learning environment if used proportionately and in proper places. It can refresh the minds of the students and remove the monotony of the class hence increasing their comfort levels, retaining the subject content, and thereon affecting their grades positively.

LIMITATIONS

The study limitations include small sample size, a single higher educational institute for data collection, and the use of the only quantitative approach for data analysis. A future researcher can use more diverse methods of data collection for getting more appropriate results.

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