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(2014)

Lecturing and the limits of laughter.

In Baguley, M (Ed.) *Proceedings of the 2014 International Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)*.

Australian Association for Research in Education, Australia, pp. 1-9.

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Lecturing and the Limits of Laughter

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Abstract

The literature on humour in teaching frequently defaults to a series of maxims about how it can be used appropriately: ‘Never tease students’, ‘Don’t joke about sensitive issues’, ‘Never use laughter for disciplinary purposes’. This paper outlines recent research into the boundaries of humour-use within teacher education, which itself forms one part of a broadly-based study into the use of humour within tertiary teaching. This particular part of the research involves semi-structured, in-depth interviews with university academics. Following the ‘benign violations’ theory of humour—wherein, to be funny, a situation/statement must be some kind of a social violation, that violation must be regarded as relatively benign, and the two ideas must be held simultaneously—this paper suggests that the willingness of academics to use particular types of humour in their teaching revolves around the complexities of determining the margins of ‘the benign’. These margins are shaped in part by pedagogic limitations, but also by professional delimitations. In terms of limitations, the boundaries of humour are set by the academic environment of the university, by the characteristics of different cohorts of students, and by what those students are prepared to laugh at. In terms of delimitations, most academics are prepared to tease their student, and many are prepared to use laughter as a form of discipline, however their own humour orientation, academic seniority, and employment security play a large role in determining what kinds of humour will be used, and where boundaries will be set. The central conclusion here is that formal maxims of humour provide little more than vague strategic guidelines, largely failing to account for the complexity of teaching relationships, for the differences between student cohorts, and for the talents and standing of particular teachers.

Introduction

The literature on the use of humour in teaching seems pretty unequivocal. Laughter in the classroom acts to relieve stress and anxiety (Shibinshi & Martin, 2010), it focuses attention (Ulloth, 2002); it improves enjoyment of the subject (Torok, McMorris, & Wen-Chi, 2004); it helps students engage with the subject matter (Glenn, 2002); it helps them retain that material (Garner, 2006); and it improves teacher-pupil relationships (Nesi, 2012). However, the relationship between humour and pedagogy is not always necessarily and unequivocally positive. For every helpful and affirmative element that humour can bring to the learning process, it also has the potential to bring the opposite (Banas et al. 2011)

Just as the effective use of humour can engage and assist students, so too can the clumsy or mean-spirited use of humour disengage and discourage student. The important questions therefore become: how do teachers organise the boundaries for their humour? How do they determine what

kinds of humour are acceptable within learning contexts, and where the joking should stop? Understanding the boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable is one of the most important skills of the successfully funny. Not challenging enough, and attempts at humour can be bland and unamusing; too challenging, and they can be offensive—and equally unamusing.

Significantly, these boundaries have always been up for negotiation. While this flexibility is sometimes organised in a relatively prescribed manner, as within medieval carnival (Humphrey, 2001), for the most part it occurs in a more informal and piecemeal way. Even so, complex sets of constraints operate here, determining what is funny and what is not, what can be said and to whom. Although these lines apply to everyone who seeks to be funny, this paper will examine how they specifically apply to university teachers.

The Benign Violation Theory of Humour

Organising an effective conceptual foundation for research into humour is far from a straightforward matter. Different theories are often only applicable to given humorous forms, such as joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940), irony (Giora, 2003) or punning (Attardo, 1994). There are also a number of general frameworks for understanding and explaining humour, none has yet gained the status of the unquestionably ‘dominant’ model. The three most frequently employed theories are *superiority theory* (Morreall, 1983), which can be traced back to Aristotle, *relief theory* (Berlyne, 1960), which has links to the ideas of Freud, and probably the most influential, *incongruity theory* (Suls, 1983). While these three models may explain some of the central element of humour, Wanzer et al. (2010) contend that none provide a satisfactory framework that addresses questions relating specifically to education. For instance, they do not explain why humorous messages may or may not facilitate learning; likewise, and of central importance to this paper, they do not address the issue of the appropriateness of a given type of humour, one of the most important criteria employed by students to assess humour in given contexts.

Arguably, in contrast to these approaches, a fourth, more recent theory holds promise for addressing the question of how boundaries are determined for the use of humour, both in general, and more specifically, within university teaching. This is the *benign violations theory*, proposed by McGraw and Warren (2010). This theory proposes that in order to elicit humour, three conditions are necessary: first, a situation must be appraised as a violation. This violation may take any number of forms, for example violations to personal dignity, or to linguistic norms, social norms, and/or moral norms. Second, a situation must be appraised as benign. An example used here is that of tickling or play fighting, which can be a violation of both social codes and personal space, but is usually regarded as benign, and hence will elicit laughter. Finally, these two appraisals must occur simultaneously.

Just as there are a wide variety of possible violations, the theory argues that there are also a number of ways in which that violation can seem benign: first, if there exists a norm suggesting that something is wrong, but another norm that suggests it is acceptable. An example of this would be a tutor teasing students who turn up late for a tutorial. The first norm suggests that teachers do not mock their pupils, but at the same time there exists a norm that late pupils will be disciplined. Second, a violation can be benign if there is only weak commitment to the violated norm. An academic clowning around at the front of a lecture theatre may violate a social norm of expected conduct for mature, respected professionals, but this is hardly a norm reflecting a matter of life and death. Finally, a violation can be benign if it is psychologically distant. To explain this concept, McGraw and Warren (2010, p. 1142) cite the famous Mel Brooks quote: ‘Tragedy is where I cut my finger. Comedy is where you walk into an open sewer and die.’

Though emerging out of cognitive psychology, benign violations theory appears to be applicable to all domains where humour operates—be that slapstick, teasing, tickling, or puns—contexts

previously regarded as far too diverse for any one theory of humour to successfully encompass. Its logic is essentially simple:

Humor provides a healthy and socially beneficial way to react to hypothetical threats, remote concerns, minor setbacks, social faux pas, cultural misunderstandings, and other benign violations people encounter on a regular basis. Humor also serves a valuable communicative function ... Laughter and amusement signal to the world that a violation is indeed okay. (McGraw & Warren, 2010, p. 1148)

Methodology

This research forms one part of a broader study into humour and pedagogy. Conducted within the Faculty of Education of a large, metropolitan Australian University, the research consisted of three parts: 1) a survey of all Education students into their attitudes, expectations and intentions regarding the use of humour in teaching; 2) a similar survey of all Faculty of Education teaching staff; and 3) semi-structured, in-depth interviews with members of the teaching staff. This paper addresses issues emerging from those semi-structured interviews.

This element of the research entailed semi-structured, in-depth interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes each. 75 members of the teaching staff completed the survey; 40 agreed to be interviewed, of whom 15 were ultimately selected. The interviewees consisted of three sessional teachers, three lecturers, three senior lecturers, three associate professors, and three professors. Reflecting the gender balance of the faculty, in each of these categories there were two females interviewees and one male. The interviewees were also selected as representing a range of different, self-identified abilities with humour. After the interviews were completed, a thematic analysis of the data was then conducted using Nvivo.

Results/Discussion: Structural Boundaries of University Laughter

This paper will focus upon how boundaries are drawn between the appropriate and the inappropriate, between what can be deemed a *benign* violation, and what is likely to be regarded—either by the students, or by the wider institution—simply as a violation. The distinction between the forces exerted by students in determining the boundaries of humour use in the classroom, and those forces exerted by the university, is an important one. To employ an academic parallel: there is a distinction between the *limitations* and *delimitations* of boundary-setting for humour use. That is, humour can be organised according to the *limitations of pedagogic circumstance* (who the audience is, and what they are prepared to laugh at), and the *delimitations of professional choice* (how much of a risk tertiary teachers are prepared to take, based upon humour orientation or seniority; whether or not they will use humour to tease or discipline students). While these two categories are not mutually exclusive—indeed, there is significant overlap between them—this schema forms a productive framework for analysis. Taking the two categories in turn:

The Limitations of Pedagogic Circumstance.

The university teachers interviewed in this study contend that there are a number of ways in which specifics of the educational environment—location, audience, notions of acceptable humour—affect how humour can be used within lectures and tutorials. Three main issues emerged here:

1) *Academic Environment*

While universities are often portrayed as liberal environments, where alternative thinking and freedom of expression are to be encouraged and protected, the situation within such contemporary institutions is often far more complex (Hil, 2012). Not only are universities now ‘corporate

entities', with business models and reputations to protect, individual faculties have their own histories, interests, and status to consider. As one junior academic noted:

'Look ... this is a faculty of education we're talking about here. When you peel away all the transformative rhetoric, this is a pretty conservative place.' Sessional Lecturer, male

It is also suggested that the on-line profile of most modern universities exacerbates teacher concern over the use of humour. Whereas an ill-considered joke might have once raised eyebrows in the audience, and then simply been forgotten as the lecture moved on, it is now likely to be preserved in digital form.

'Recording is a big deal, and that does change everything. It means that someone's going to be listening or watching you out of the context of the class, and things can take on a very different perspective at that point.' Associate Professor 1, female

Even though such constraints on humour are considered to be significant by university teachers, most within the field of education still regard themselves as having a relatively high degree of freedom in the use of humour, particularly since the majority have taught within primary and secondary schools.

'I swear a lot in my personal life, and I find it hard, once things start to be funny in class, to not start swearing as part of the joke. You can't do that much (while teaching) in high school ... you can do it a lot more in university.' Lecturer 1, Female

2) Humour and Audience Effects

Within a faculty of education, the student body is not a single, homogenous grouping. Different qualifications attract different ages and levels of life-experience; different specialisations attract different personality types, and have different gender balances; furthermore, while the vast majority of the students are domestic, some are not. All of these factors contribute to shaping what an audience will laugh at, and what it will take offence to—that is, what will be regarded as a benign violation, and what will not.

'Different demographics have different forms of humour. I do notice that with the first years—the Bachelor of Education students—it's a different sort of humour there, (as compared to) the older, more mature, certainly more-worldly-experience humour of, say, the Graduate Diploma student.' Lecturer, male

In addition to this limitation, student teaching area also shapes how boundaries are to be set, and whether a given line of humour will be regarded as a benign violation, or whether offence will be taken.

'There's actually very different relationships to humour with students from different disciplinary backgrounds. So I can push students from the Physical Education group very, very far, and can make fun of them very, very much, and they won't bat an eyelid ... whereas some other students that are maybe doing say, early childhood, you can't always guarantee they'll like that.' Lecturer 1, female

3) Humour and the Inappropriate

Ultimately, the greatest limitation on the use of humour within tertiary teaching is simply the boundary of what students are prepared to laugh at. That is, some areas appear to be considered inherently non-benign by most university audiences. Research has suggested that students are uncomfortable with a variety of forms of offensive humour; this can include swearing, reference to personal drinking/drug use, and sexual jokes (Wanzer et al., 2006). It is this latter domain—sexuality—which is widely regarded as a particular minefield:

'You can talk about religion; you can talk about death; you can talk about ... –you can even make Thalidomide jokes and get away with them—but any mention of sexuality ... that seems to be the biggest taboo.' Professor, male

It is perhaps a reflection of the issue of the 'psychological distance' constraint within benign violations theory that jokes about Thalidomide—a morning sickness drug that caused foetal deformity in the late 1950s—can now be regarded by some teachers as appropriate. However, along with sexuality, there are a range of predictable topics that students are unlikely to laugh at, and that lecturers stay away from.

'Obviously the whole political correctness—race, class, gender—there's no way—sexuality, religion, all that—there's no way that I'm going to venture in to any of the borderlands ...' Associate Professor 1, female

Once again, however, this is more nuanced than simply understanding these boundaries as applying to all lecturers equally. Teachers are generally aware that their use of humour is 'embodied', that the boundaries for what they can say, and to whom, are shaped by their own gender, age, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality:

'There are certain topics as a male, and as a male over 50—sexuality being the main one—that I'm not able to joke about in the same way that I would have once been able to joke about, potentially, when there wasn't that age difference.' Associate Professor, Male

Interestingly, this constraint was not felt to anywhere near the same extent by women. In fact, the relationship between humour and 'embodiment' could work in exactly the opposite way:

'I'm an old woman ... I can get away with saying what the hell I like.' Professor 1, female

The Delimitations of Professional Choice

In addition to the contextual conditions imposed upon university teachers regarding the successful use of humour, teachers also impose conditions upon themselves. That is, they *delimit* how much humour they will employ, and how they will employ it, often on the basis of issues such as humour orientation and professional status. Within this domain, four further issues emerged from the research:

1) Humour Orientation and Risk-Taking

The ability to employ humour effectively—to be funny—is often referred to as 'humour orientation' (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). Importantly, humour orientation is a measure of how well an individual can produce humorous messages, not the degree to which they appreciate humour (Banas et al., 2011). Irrespective of whether or not the teachers have a high humour orientation, almost all the teachers in this sample placed a high value on humour, and sought to use it in their classroom. However, two differences did surface on some specifics of how that humour is used:

First, in keeping with previous research (Wanzer et al., 2010), it became clear that teachers with a high humour orientation use humour more frequently than those teachers with a lower humour orientation.

'If the opportunity is there, I tend to always take it; and in a classroom where there is no humour, I feel like there's a lack of life.' Lecturer 1, female

This should not come as any great surprise. Those who have success making people laugh in general social contexts are unlikely to dispense with this communication and engagement strategy

just because they are at work, particularly when that work specifically involves effective communication and engagement.

Second, also in keeping with previous research (Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008), teachers with a high humour orientation are more likely to use more risky kinds of humour—such as mockery, and offensive, irreverent and disparaging humour. The logic here is that those who are more comfortable dealing with the complexities and dangers of humour use on a daily basis, are more likely to do so within educational settings:

'I have a very abrasive personality 24/7. I'm an abrasive human, and at 35 dude, not much is going to change. I've always been an abrasive human; I'm an acquired taste ... By the end of semester 90 per cent of them would be coping, the 10 per cent who hate, me hate me like poison ... So, on the student feedback form it would be, oh (the lecturer) was really funny or whatever, that's usually 90 per cent of the commentaries ...' Senior Lecturer 2, female

This can be contrasted with the more conservative approach of lecturers with a lower humour orientation:

'I don't think of myself as a funny person; I think if anything I come over as being a bit too serious ... I think that a lot of humour goes directly to really highly problematic positions that people have. A lot of humour really is a mask for sexism, racism, homophobia, and misogyny.' Senior Lecturer, Male

2) Teasing Students

The 'how to' literature on the use of humour in teaching expresses extreme caution when dealing with the issue of teasing students (Berk, 2002, 2003; Lundberg & Miller-Thurston, 2002). Quite rightly, they point to the academic and psychological damage that can be done to students by ill-judged comments from those in positions of authority, in an environment which continues to contain significant elements of the pastoral (Hunter, 1994). This is a domain where the border between the benign and the aggressive can be particularly fraught. In spite of these concerns, this research suggests there appears to be less worry over the ethics of teasing students, in any absolute sense, and more concern over simply making sure it is done well. The general consensus appears to be that mocking students is perfectly appropriate if it is done in a way that the students immediately recognise as benign. This is most frequently accomplished in an incremental way over the course of a semester, a part of the processes of rapport-building.

'I tease students all the time ... but I've got to build up some kind of rapport with them so they will allow me to tease them.' Professor, male

'When they knew me and I knew them, then it was fine, but when I just walked in cold they went, who are you, sister? ... A lot of humour has to do with trust.' Associate Professor 2, female

A further proviso with the teasing of students is that most university teachers have far fewer issues with this practice if it is directed at a large group, rather than just a specific individual.

'I think there's a big difference between teasing an entire group for not doing the set readings, or something like that ... and picking on just one person for the same thing. You're kind of in a different place with that.' Lecturer, male

As an extension of the issue of teasing, the issue arises of whether humour should ever be used as a way of maintaining discipline within educational settings. Clearly, making fun of a group for not doing their set readings constitutes the strategic deployment of humour for specific disciplinary purposes.

3) Humour and Discipline

Of all the issues discussed by the fifteen university teachers in this research, this question provides the greatest range of responses. A small percentage consider that humour should never be used for this end, even those who regard it as appropriate to tease students under other circumstances.

'Punching up, not punching down ... you punch up to power, not down to your audience; and you laugh with, you don't laugh at. Those two lessons recur again and again in comedy. And those are things I value in teaching. A student shouldn't feel alienated or isolated because of laughter; the laughter in a class shouldn't be a weapon, perceived or actual ...' Senior Lecture 2, female

However, the majority of those interviewed expressed the opinion that it was acceptable to discipline students with humour, but that this should be done with caution, and the target of the humour must still be able to find the comments funny.

'I don't think I'm going to ridicule somebody just because they get on my nerves, or something. But, what I would probably do is trying to defuse situations. If I had this one person fresh out of high school trying to tell me how to run the tutorial, and make everything better, I would just say something humorous that wasn't offensive...' Sessional Lecturer, Male

This group also noted that, potentially undesirable as disciplining students through the use of humour may be, it is often less destructive, both to group cohesion and to the individual themselves, than any of the non-humour-based alternatives that may be immediately available.

'If you have to let someone know they've stuffed up, isn't it better to do it with a smile on your face?' Sessional Lecturer 2, female

Finally, a smaller group of university teachers consider that humour is a perfectly appropriate, indeed desirable, mechanism for maintaining discipline. This can be done both where the target of the humour regards the comments as essentially benign, and still 'part of the game':

'It depends on the type of kid you're talking about. Some I taught in London, that was the only humour they got—putting them back in their place—where they could have a bit of banter back at you, and if you completely caned them, the rest of the class will go, 'Oh you got done! You got done!' and it's just a laugh.' Lecturer 2, female

It can also occur where the disciplinary elements are more obvious, and benign nature of the humour less certain:

Talking about those students who most often are male, more mature, who will have a go at you in tutorials, as a status thing for themselves. That's when you take the p..s out of them, to shut them down. Sorry, but it's true, isn't it? Associate Professor, male.

4) Professional Status and Job Security

The final issue emerging from the interviews concerns the professional status and employment security of the lecturers themselves, and the degree to which these are factored into the risks they are prepared to take regarding humour. Given that all attempts at humour involve some degree of moral or social transgression, according to benign violations theory, then it is not surprising that the possible negative consequences of those transgressions form an integral part of the decision-making process, vis-à-vis humour use. Junior academics in particular are very aware that one badly misplaced joke can potentially have disastrous consequences for their careers, and delimit their humour accordingly.

'Because I'm new, I'm just conscious that if someone was to say something really bad (about me), it would probably affect my chances of being asked to do it again.' Sessional Lecturer 1, Female

At the other end of the professional scale, senior academics seem far less concerned by any possible negative repercussions of their actions. As such, most are far more comfortable in pushing the boundaries of humour use.

'Yeah, I do what I believe in ... I know there may be certain consequences for me, but I'll take those, because that's more important.' Professor 1, Female

Interestingly, seniority also appears to have a role to play in delimiting the types of humour used, not just how close that humour gets to the boundaries of the acceptable. Most of the teachers interviewed stated that they use self-deprecating humour. However, several of the more junior teachers stated that this strategy came with an entirely different set of risks.

'As a young teacher, I can't play that line, because it's just a hop, skip and a jump to people saying to your head of school, 'She didn't even know what she was talking about'' Lecturer 1, female

Conclusion

Five main conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, benign violations theory provides an effective framework for the analysis of boundary-setting for humour use within tertiary teaching. While asking questions about where academics set the limits to their joking behaviour is clearly already comfortably with the home terrain of this theory—with its inherent focus on the notion of violation, benign or otherwise—however, it also appears to afford humour researchers, irrespective of their epistemological starting-point or the specific context of their study, a flexible and comprehensive explanatory structure for their work.

Second, the most interesting questions within this particular research involve the various ways in which the boundaries of the benign are shaped. Importantly, these boundaries do not appear to be static, and are the subject of only limited common agreement. In general however, they loosely mold both by the structural limitations set by the institutions, faculties, and student cohorts that constitute the working environment of tertiary teaching life—it should be emphasised that this research was conducted solely within an education faculty, and different codes, practices and limitations may well exist within different disciplinary environments. Boundaries are also set by the delimitations those teachers place on themselves, the risks they are prepared to take with their humour, and the uses they are prepared to put that humour to. Questions of humour use become even more nuanced when they are layered across questions of professional responsibility, academic seniority, and pedagogic effectiveness.

Third, the literature on teaching and humour often include advice about how it should, and should not, be deployed. These include such maxims as, 'Never tease students', 'Don't joke about sensitive issues', 'Don't use laughter as a disciplinary device,' and 'Don't be afraid to make a fool of yourself'. If this research demonstrates anything, it is that such rules are, first, little more than the most nebulous of strategic guidelines, and second, almost entirely contingent upon a range of contextual factors, such as who the students are, the humour orientation of the teacher, the teacher's professional seniority, how far into the semester the humour is being used, what the humour is being used for, and surely most importantly, whether the students are likely to find it funny. It should be stressed here that this element of the research project deals solely with university teachers' perceptions of their own teaching, and its concomitant reception by students. It may well be that the quantitative data from the students themselves, yet to be analysed, will paint a very different picture.

Finally, as the benign violations understanding of humour states, if it's not some kind of violation, it isn't going to be funny; so according to this particular theory, humour is an inherently risky business. Still, given that every tertiary teacher interviewed in this research recognised the importance and effectiveness of laughter in the lecture theatre and the classroom, irrespective of their own skills and confidence in the area, it appears that that this is regarded as a risk well worth taking.

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