

Chapter 8. Not a Laughing Matter: Creating a Humor-Centric User Design in OWI

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Abstract: Online spaces are often viewed as cold and robotic platforms where it is difficult to cultivate human connection. Building and nurturing a virtual classroom community can be more challenging than fostering a face-to-face classroom community. Moreover, OWI deals with the teaching and learning of writing, and writing can be an immensely personal and social activity. In that sense, it is crucial that OWI classes possess an element of warmth and cordiality so that the members of the classroom community feel a sense of comfort and ease while sharing their thoughts and work with one another. This chapter presents humor as a method to promote that togetherness and sociability. It focuses on the ways to utilize pedagogical humor in OWI classes in a productive manner while cautioning about the downsides of inappropriate humor.

Keywords: online writing instruction, personal, social, pedagogical humor, fostering virtual classroom community, human connection

It is the final week of Spring 2020 semester. Due to the safety concerns owing to the surge in Covid-19 cases, the College Composition course is being taught online since March. The transition happened without much preparation, and everyone has been quite stressed out for the past few weeks. This is the last class of the final week and it is a presentation day. The teacher decides to dissipate the tension by cracking a joke. She looks at the anxious faces on her computer screen. She takes a deep breath and unmutes herself on Zoom, the platform that is being used for the class, and comments in a nonchalant voice: “Jeff, where is Cookie? Let’s say Hi to her before we begin.” As if on cue, the large black and white cat, Cookie, who has been a regular member of the class ever since it switched to the online platform, appears on his screen. She blinks a couple of times and mews, her face perfectly somber. The mew is loud and clear since Jeff, once again, has forgotten to mute himself. This makes everyone in the class, including Jeff and the instructor, burst into laughter. Everyone looks visibly relaxed after that little episode.

This scenario might sound familiar to many people who have been a part of online classes as students or instructors. If the class is synchronous, it is quite normal for people to attend the class from their living rooms. In these situations,

pets often become a part of the classroom community. The case of Cookie, the cat, is just an example of contextual humor where a furry member of the online classroom added to the fun quotient. Apart from such spontaneous comments, there are many other ways of integrating humor into online pedagogy through written and audio-visual means. This chapter discusses them and emphasizes that despite having its fair share of challenges, humor, when incorporated into online writing instruction, can be a beneficial way to nurture human relationships in virtual classrooms.

Setting up an online instruction module can be a challenging task. There are several aspects of the class ranging from syllabus and assignments to the mode of online instruction (asynchronous or synchronous or both) that need to be considered. Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle present the Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic (PARS) framework where they emphasize on designing online writing courses with students' experiences in mind. The "P" in PARS, that stands for "Personal," can be a crucial factor in this context. When instruction takes place through online mode, there is undoubtedly more challenge involved since it is difficult to replicate the humanness that comes naturally in a face-to-face setting. But that does not mean that online classrooms need to be cold and robotic. According to Borgman and McArdle (2019), "Writing is personal, and teaching is personal—connecting with students is a way to confirm students understand various elements of the course" (p. 8). And humor can be that personal element, that binding factor, which can bring people closer, if it is used correctly.

Benefits and Challenges

Humor is an essential part of human interaction and community building. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines humor as "the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous; the ability to be funny or to be amused by things that are funny." Humor, when used appropriately, can lighten up a tense atmosphere, and an instructor who uses humor in a suitable manner comes across as amicable, personable, and warm. Shared laughter makes people less defensive and more welcoming. Humor, according to Borchardt (2002), "breaks into people's preoccupation with what goes wrong. When you can laugh at a problem, you imply that you will prevail against it. Humor humanizes—it takes you from being a part-time professional to the realm of being a full-time human" (p. 248). Humor adds human touch to digital spaces and connects people sitting behind screens with one another.

However, while it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of humor, it is essential to recognize the ways in which it can be detrimental. Offensive or derogatory humor should be avoided in all educational settings. Moreover, it is immensely crucial that jokes are cracked while keeping the context in mind. The cat humor mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, for instance, worked well

because there was already a suitable atmosphere surrounding it. Also, it was innocent, well-intentioned, and positive, and it aided to the process of instruction by minimizing the tension in the classroom. Torok et al. (2010) conducted a study investigating the use of humor in a college classroom with an aim to examine the students' perceptions towards pedagogical humor and the types of humor recommended by the students and the faculty. When asked about the limitations of classroom humor, one of the most common responses by the students was "the potential to be offensive, especially regarding issues that were ethnically or sexually precarious" (Torok et al., 2010, p. 18). A degrading remark in the guise of a joke, therefore, has a negative effect on the students' learning processes, and breaks the ethical code of classroom conduct.

An instructor can always choose the kind of humor they want to bring to their classroom. Borgman and McArdle (2019) feel that the need for this connection between the instructor and the learner is even more valuable in a writing class because writing is a personal task which is, at the same time, social. They observe that "students want a social experience, even if it's in an online course; humans are social and they want their courses online to feel social and it's not so much that a class is actually social but more that it gives off the appearance of being a social community" (2019, p. 25). Since the online classroom is a community, it gets deeply agitated when pedagogical humor turns hostile. Sometimes, even an offhand comment that was intended to be funny might sound hurtful to some people, which may spoil the learning environment. Furthermore, a jovial teacher might not be perceived as a competent instructor and as a result, the students might not end up taking the course seriously. These kinds of risks are always present, and it takes time and patience for a teacher to develop their personal sense of humor, which is simply an extension of one's teaching persona. According to Korobkin (1988), "Awareness of humor can be a gradual behavioral process in which an individual develops a personal outlook on life that sees, recognizes, and accepts rather than judges and commands" (p. 157). She maintains that infusing humor into classroom instruction requires continuous efforts and revisions that is built on thought, experience, and positive energy.

Building a Student-Focused Community

Despite these challenges, humor is still worth including in online instruction pedagogy since it enhances the virtual experience and helps build a closer-knit academic community. While transitioning online from a physical classroom, or primarily planning for synchronous or asynchronous or hybrid instruction, instructors are often looking for ways to make the experience as comfortable and convenient as a physical classroom. But at the same time, it is unfeasible to ignore the affordances of the virtual platform that the course is going to be conducted on. Humor, in this scenario, can be one of those elements that are migrated from face to face classrooms to online classrooms to fill in that gap. In the study that is

previously mentioned in this chapter, Torok et al. (2004) further note that “When asked about the potential outcomes of using humor in the classroom, students mentioned that humor has the power to make teachers more likeable, facilitate understanding of course material, lower tension, boost student morale, and increase student attentiveness” (p. 18). In traditional physical classrooms, using humor for these purposes might be much easier compared to virtual academic spheres. The challenge is greater online due to the lack of physicality in human connection and at times, the inability to read facial expressions or hear the voice tone in fully asynchronous online courses. In virtual scenarios, there is a high possibility that humor is misconstrued, and that situation needs to be avoided. Shatz and LoSchivo (2006) note that while selecting humor for an online course, it is essential that the educational purpose behind the humor is considered. According to them:

In contrast to humorists, who gauge success by laughter, educators measure the effectiveness of humor by how it promotes learning. Although humor can be used to increase students’ overall enjoyment of the online experience, most of the humor incorporated into an online course should serve an instructional purpose. Otherwise, the course material and the instructor might be perceived as “fluff.” (para. 9)

It is the instructor’s job to determine that their humor is educational, classroom-appropriate, as well as a social lubricant. When used properly, humor can quell student anxiety, make difficult concepts clearer, and create a positive impact on teacher-student interactions and classroom relationship dynamics.

Humor can help students feel less awkward about their odd backgrounds, strange camera angles, babies and/or pets moving around, bad Wi-Fi connections along with other technological difficulties, and general exhaustion from staring at the computer screen for too long. Garner (2006) conducted a study to assess the impact of curriculum-specific humor on retention and recall, as well as student evaluations of the course and the instructor. Although some instructors believe that humor can be disruptive, Garner states that “the use of appropriate humor in this study has been shown to enhance the learning environment and has a significantly positive impact on the retention of educational materials in a real-world academic setting” (2006, p. 179). When humor is content-focused and suitable, it makes the students feel that the instructor is making efforts to decrease anxiety and make the class more enjoyable and productive. Since the instructor is the authority, it is, for the most part, their job to create this easygoing, cheerful atmosphere by assimilating humor in their classroom. The instructors, according to Korobkin (1988), need to establish a “comedy routine” (p. 157) in the sense that they need to be aware of the subject matter, their own personality and presentation skills along with the needs of their audience, i.e., the students. Korobkin states that “the college instructor can use the instruc-

tional design process in order to promote effective and laughter-filled learning” (1988, p. 158). Instructional design, therefore, is a strategy that deals with developing instructional approaches and materials, identifying objectives, as well as analyzing activities. By incorporating humor into their instructional design, instructors can ensure that their class is inclined towards using pedagogical humor, suitably and systematically.

Instructional design is a crucial aspect of online writing courses because despite being different in terms of the medium of instruction, an online classroom, just like a physical classroom, needs to be pleasant and motivating, as the goal for both is to educate. At the same time, online spaces have their own attributes which shape the pedagogical expectations and design of the class. According to the CCCC’s position statement of principles and example of effective practices for online writing instruction (2013), “Appropriate composition teaching/learning strategies should be developed for the unique features of the online instructional environment” (OWI Principle 3). Online environment is unique because it is a classroom situated in a cloud space. However, the online medium still has parallels with face-to-face instruction, such as the quality of academic performance that needs to be maintained and the level of student satisfaction that needs to be achieved. Other similarities include group meeting space, working towards the same goal, i.e., learning to write better, and community building in terms of teacher/student interaction and student/student interaction. Humor, for that matter, can be a positive addition to the online instructional design because it adds humanness to the digital space. Borgman and McArdle (2019) underscore the significance of being personal in specific areas of the course. One of the things they mention is sharing the teacher’s own writing to cultivate connections with students. They maintain that “instructors should take the lead in making the online classroom a safe space to share their writing by sharing some of their own writing and inviting conversation” (2019, p. 25). For instance, the teacher could provide the students with a humorous prompt and then give them a chance to connect it to their own lives. One example could be: I once tried to think from the point of view of my cat. If she could write, what would her daily journal look like? Remember, she is a Professor Cat. So, she will be able to write complete, correct sentences and present a brilliant account of her day. What would *your* pet’s journal be like? Remember, they have the thinking and writing abilities of their human, a College Student. This prompt could be followed by a brief paragraph on the instructor’s own account from the point of view of their cat. This would keep things light and funny, make the teacher appear more relatable, and could be, in general, considered a good way to build mutual rapport with the students, throughout the semester.

Students, in that sense, should always be kept in mind while constructing the course with humor infused into it. When instructors design a course, they create an outline for the entire semester. They give attention to details when they plan out larger as well as smaller assignments and ways of delivering and executing

them. And since students are their audience, it is vital that they remain at the forefront as the instructors make these crucial decisions. Borgman and McArdle (2019) agree when they state that

the main thing to consider when creating a course design is who are your student users. How will they be accessing the content? How comfortable are they with technology? What do they need to learn to move on to the next course? Considering larger questions like these will help you map out a successful course design. (p. 72)

When people never meet face-to-face, the situation gets a little complicated, and as a result, communication gaps may ensue, thus causing misinterpretation of moods and information in the class. Warnock (2015) examines the foundational structure that ground online writing instruction. In his work, “Teaching the OWI Course,” he claims, “in my observation of OWCs and reading student evaluations associated with them, a common disappointment that students voice is the lack of engagement in the asynchronous discussions by their instructors” (p. 164). However, just because the instructor is not commenting in detail, one cannot necessarily conclude that they are detached or disinterested. It may simply mean that there are some fissures that need to be filled.

Such cracks and gaps might be the result of dry language that is often used during these interactions or the lack of congeniality in the existing relationship between the teacher and the students. Humor, in either case, could be a good solution. James (2004) believes that as more classes are offered in the online format, the teachers and students should be aware about the advantages of humor. He states that the “teachers need to learn how to use humor to their benefit in the classroom. Humor can assume many forms, including body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice” (2004, p. 93). Here is an example of how this can be done: The day you are teaching proposal writing on Zoom, for instance, (or even recording an asynchronous lecture), show up in a formal attire but have an animal wallpaper in the background and pretend that you have not seen them yet. In the middle of the conversation, casually look behind and have a dramatic “Oops” moment. You may remark, “Hey, I didn’t know that he had been standing there. Hello, buddy! Can you hear me?” You might smile, shrug, and carry on with the lecture and then at some point, acknowledge the animal again. If possible, include the animal in your conversation. Visual cues like these help in retention of past lectures. You can, for instance, refer to this lecture in the future when you are commenting on a student’s work and say: “That day when I was in my best suit talking about proposals, you know, I had a guy standing behind me, do you remember we had discussed about . . .” And this could be a good connecting point to the previous lesson while providing current feedback. Instead of an animal, you may use a historical figure, a celebrity, a cartoon character, or any other remarkable figure that the students might remember for a while.

Final Thoughts and Application

To follow up on that, here are some final thoughts and application of humor in the online writing classroom.

Icebreakers

When the teacher sends out the introductory announcement notice or welcome video, they will be talking about the first assignment of the semester. According to Hellman (2007), humorous icebreakers can be an excellent way to set the tone for the rest of the period which can be immensely conducive to alleviating tensions and creating a learner-friendly environment. “On occasion, you could produce an official looking document and act as if you are about to read an important announcement. Then, tell a joke. Guerilla humor strikes!” (Hellman, 2007, p. 37). Obviously, since you would be doing it in an online class, you could probably do it on a video lecture or through written means. Similarly, you would be doing it on a screen if it is a synchronous class. Another example is if your icebreaker is a discussion board post, you might want to try an activity that includes short personal stories using hilarious images of pets or students’ favorite movie scenes or cartoon strips. The teacher, however, should be mindful about not compelling the students to share stories or pictures that make them feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.

Instructional videos

These are the soul of an online class, especially if it is an asynchronous class. Instead of just reading announcements and emails that go on forever, if the students get a few minutes of audio-visual lecture from the instructor, it might make them feel more connected to the mystery person on the other side of the screen who is responsible for teaching them and grading their papers. Melanie Hibbert (2014) talks about instructional presence in her article “What Makes an Online Instructional Video Compelling?” She conducts interviews with students and puts together the responses which show that faculty presence is the key factor related to students’ engagement and perceived learning from videos. “The most engaging videos for me [are] when the professors use wit and humor,” (2014, para. 21) she quotes one of the interviewees. In order to add humor to the videos, the instructors can use different strategies like including deliberate, pregnant pauses, cracking jokes and sharing anecdotes.

Likewise, videos can also be borrowed from other internet platforms. There are serious topics that need to be discussed in the class and plagiarism is one of them. It is extremely crucial that the instructor and the students have the conversation about plagiarism and the repercussions of plagiarism. However, the topic can be discussed in good humor. For example, there is a short Saturday Night

Live video where a teacher is assigning grades to students who have plagiarized their essays from the internet.

[youtube.com/watch?v=yDxN4c_CmpI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDxN4c_CmpI)

This is a six-minute-long video titled: “Plagiarism.” It was aired on May 3, 2003. The video is humorous in terms of its content, but it holds a serious message. It is about a class where the teacher realizes that a few students have plagiarized. Some have copied from the internet, some have asked their older siblings for their essays, and some have decided to copy user reviews off of Amazon. Videos like these could bring much needed attention to the issue of plagiarism, albeit in a funny way. It is, however, important that the teacher establishes the gravity of the issue, and even this video, despite its humor, shows that the students end up getting an “F” for plagiarized homework.

Assignments

These are the major areas where humor can be at play. In addition to using humorous language to draft an assignment question or a writing prompt, humor in delivery can also help in explaining complex concepts. In addition to building relationships between instructor and students, humor can also play a significant role in solidifying connections between students.

This could be useful, for instance, in forming online peer communities. Students learn and enjoy more when they feel connected with the teacher and their peers. According to Anderson (2011), “humor enhances creative thinking; increases group cohesion; increases student attention and interest; and builds classroom climates that promotes learning” (p. 75). Students in online classes might dread any group work, for instance, peer reviews. An instructor can create an atmosphere through light-hearted discussion board posts or a common Google document where the whole class can write together. Similarly, casual jokes and humorous materials like memes or social media posts or comic strips or cartoons can help students formulate bonds during groupwork. Once the community is formed, it is easier for them to work as a team during presentations and peer reviews.

Likewise, introduction/icebreaker posts could be a method of assigning groups in an online class. The instructor might ask students to include a funny story and/or a picture that is related them. And based on the similarity of those pictures, people can be put in the same groups. The instructor can always write individual notes to the groups saying: “Hey guys, you are the Happy Campers. All three of you had hilarious stories and pictures related to camping!” The next time they give a presentation, they can be introduced as the group: “Happy Campers” and this contributes to the development of group humor which is understood and enjoyed by the entire classroom community.

Feedback

David James (2004), in his commentary, “A need for humor in online courses,” cites Linda Boynton, an Oakland Community College instructor, who has taught online for several years. Boynton insists that humor is pivotal in her online classes, although humor in an online classroom looks different than humor in onsite classrooms.

According to James, Boynton’s online humor is often expressed through written comments. “Boynton keeps extensive personal notes on students so she can use familiar phrases or allusions in email responses when attempting to be humorous. She warns that crafting a message like this means “going back through and editing it so it reads more casually and hopefully more ‘funny’” (2004, p. 93).

Furthermore, Boynton believes in presenting students with the opportunity to be “reactively funny” online. In doing so, she shares her own personal anecdotes that are full of humor, so that the students are prompted to do the same. Although risky, Boynton believes that humor is a key component in online classroom and she successfully assimilates humor into her pedagogy through careful and thorough planning. To this, James adds: “Because humor is one of the major traits of the best, most effective teachers, it is a characteristic that all teachers should want to hone, practice, and nurture, regardless of medium” (2004, p. 94). Something as simple as a smiling emoji can work wonders in helping the student decipher the teacher’s tone when reading written comments.

Visual cues

Being a part of an online class as an instructor or a student is not just about teaching or learning the contents of the course. It is also about getting acquainted with the etiquette of conversing, behaving, and interacting in the virtual world. This includes something as simple as choosing an appropriate Zoom background or one’s own display picture, which might induce laughter but not offend anybody in any manner. It is important that both students and instructors use this opportunity to learn how to have fun while maintaining the decorum of an instructional platform.

Individual Conferences

This is an excellent opportunity where the instructor and the students get the opportunity to interact with one another through audio or video calls on an individual basis. In asynchronous classes, this is a valuable moment because it brings the instructor and the student in contact with one another on one-on-one level. Usually, conferences can be up to fifteen to thirty minutes in length and conducted once or twice every semester.

When students call, it is always good to start out with a casual chit-chat. Boynton's idea of maintaining a record of the student can be helpful in remembering a prior conversation you have had with a student. One can always make jokes like: Hey, the last time we talked you mentioned that you were having no luck with fishing. How did it go this weekend? Did you get a chance to go fishing at all? This conversation could be augmented by the instructor's own personal story about something hilarious that happened with them while they were on a fishing trip, fifteen years ago. Or, it could be something like this: I liked how you included that meme in your minor assignment. It was funny. You think you could do something more with memes?

Such amicable exchanges keep the students at ease and show them that you know them and remember them and genuinely care about their work.

Downsides of Using Humor

In addition to its perks, humor, as discussed above in the chapter, has its own downsides. There are a few things that can be done to avoid unsuitable humor:

- Mention it clearly in the syllabus that a “joke” that is considered sexually offensive or a “humorous” comment that is derogatory towards any gender, community, or individual will not be tolerated under any circumstances.
- The instructor should be mindful that their jolliness does not hinder their authority as an instructor. If the teacher gets too friendly, the students might start taking the course, its contents, as well as its grading schemes and late policies a little lightly. It is, therefore, necessary that healthy boundaries are drawn and followed. It should be made clear that a teacher can be friendly, but they can never be a friend.
- Maintain a strict balance between lightheartedness and solemnity when it comes to delivering lectures, instructions, and announcements in writing and through audio-visual means. A teacher is not a comedian, and although they might be funny, they are there to do their job, which is to teach.

Humor adds life to any class, specifically an online class. Innovative and inoffensive humor creates a positive teaching and learning environment which helps the students and the instructor have fun while doing their job. There can be little recurring jokes about the instructor's ancient coffee machine or self-deprecating humor about the instructor's forgetfulness that can put students at ease in a virtual classroom. If the students are comfortable with it, occasional jokes targeted towards them like the one mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, are acceptable. Likewise, humor that is purely related to the subject matter or the course content, along with accidental and situational humor, all add to the positive vibes of the class. A writing instructor is not a professional comedian. Regardless, a

little effort makes a great deal of difference because a teacher is in a position of authority, and their strategic humor plays an enormous role in enhancing the overall learning experience.

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