

WHY DID THE PROFESSOR CROSS THE ROAD? HOW AND WHY COLLEGE  
PROFESSORS INTENTIONALLY USE HUMOR IN THEIR TEACHING

A Dissertation

by

KAREN HILDEBRANT BUCKMAN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2010

Major Subject: Educational Human Resource Development

Why Did the Professor Cross the Road? How and Why College Professors Intentionally

Use Humor in Their Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

Why Did the Professor Cross the Road? How and Why College Professors Intentionally  
Use Humor in Their Teaching. (May 2010)

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College professors face many pressing challenges: staying current in their disciplines, becoming familiar with new technology, responding to national accountability issues, publishing scholarly research in their fields, and facilitating student learning in their classes. Teaching and learning are complex processes. Humor is a powerful instructional resource. The purpose of this study is to understand how and why college professors intentionally use humor in the classroom and what influence humor has on their teaching.

This qualitative study focuses on ten college professors who have a reputation for using humor in their classrooms. I conducted semi-structured interviews with these faculty and made four classroom observations. The interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method.

Three major findings emerged from the research. First, humor, for these professors, is a constitutive part of their identities as teachers. The professors articulated the belief that their sense of humor and the ways they used humor in the classroom made them

better teachers. Their teaching identities were created as they learned from their own teaching mentors, developed their personal teaching philosophies, and became confident enough to show their own personalities in their classrooms.

The second finding was that these professors have constructed very student-centered, positive classroom climates. All of them recognized the benefits of humor for their students and were aware of the advantages of humor for the learning process and to foster bonds between students and teacher. They also said humor made their jobs as teachers more satisfying. They were also cognizant of appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor and were careful exactly how they used humor in their teaching.

The final finding refers to how a professor may be viewed as a performer. These professors have constructed teaching identities that allow them to go into the classroom and present information often in a dramatic, striking manner. The teachers in this study have developed teaching methods that capture the students' attention, and the techniques often reflect theatrical styles or approaches that make them feel like performers.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my students. They make me laugh, keep me going, and bring me joy. It is also dedicated to my husband, Jerry, and my sons, Sam and Tim. They make me laugh, keep me going, and bring me joy every day. I dedicate this paper to my family for being wonderful.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*Why did the teacher wear sunglasses? Because she had very bright students.*

I can actually remember the first time I intentionally used humor in a classroom. I was a junior in high school and a finalist for the Rural Electric Cooperative Citizenship Contest in Missouri. I had written an essay about how my family used electricity to improve our lives. I found myself sitting with the other seven finalists at the front of a large classroom filled with the contest judges and all of the managers of the company. We must have all used the same pamphlets for our essays because the young man who was reading his essay was quoting the same statistics, reciting the same facts, and declaring that electricity was the best thing that had ever happened to him—just like my essay! I glanced down the row of candidates, and everyone was wearing the same expression—a kind of shock and wide-eyed dismay that I was feeling. They would look through their notes, shuffle their papers, and sigh. They had written the same essay, too.

Of course, I wanted to win! The prize for the four winners was a week in Washington, D.C., with the winners from the other states, and the four losing candidates won a weekend in Jefferson City, Missouri. How could I make my essay stand out? How could I get their attention and approval? I decided to share with the audience a story about how my father had brought a newborn pig into our kitchen one cold winter night. The pig was almost dead, very cold, and unusually small. Of course, when he warmed up,

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This dissertation follows the style of *Adult Education Quarterly*.

he managed to jump off the oven and run through our door and through our house, squealing and wild. We chased him all over the house. His escapades were possible only because of the miracle of wonderful electricity! Besides all of the other enlightening information in my essay, I had shared how electricity brightened our days and nights, made our farm work easier, and even allowed us to save a runt piglet. I can still see the small pig running through my mother's legs which caused her to drop a glass bowl on the kitchen floor. The audience laughed and wiped away tears from their eyes. I am sure many of them had similar experiences with trying to save ailing farm animals. The point of this story is I won first place, AND I had an epiphany. I had realized the power of humor.

I am a psychology professor at a large community college, and I have taught for 17 years. On the first day of class, I quiz my students by asking them true or false questions about some of the topics I will cover in General Psychology. I divide the class into groups and give each group a sign with "TRUE" on one side and "FALSE" printed on the other side. One of the questions I asked them in the spring semester was: "Harry consumed too much alcohol last night. He met a girl he can't forget, but this morning he cannot remember her name. It would help Harry to remember her name if he consumed too much liquor again today." Then I ask one of the groups to answer, "True or False?" The group emphatically answered: "False, of course!" The answer is true. I explained to them that in Module 21 we will discuss state dependent learning. We are more likely to remember information if we are in the same physical conditions as when we learned the material. Matt, one of my students, asked: "Ok, Mrs. Buckman, you are telling me that if

I get drunk tonight, I will remember more psychology?” Everyone laughed, and the students eagerly waited for the next question.

### Background

I approach teaching with the belief that humor is an asset in the classroom, but a major reason for this is that by nature I am a funny person; it isn't something I learned in my college curriculum. In fact college professors seldom take any courses in their degree programs that address how to teach effectively, let alone how to teach using humor.

College professors face many pressing challenges: staying current in their disciplines, becoming familiar with new technology, responding to national accountability issues, publishing scholarly research in their fields, serving on committees, and facilitating student learning in their classes. The duties of teaching can be daunting. Professors must competently convey information about a specific subject and are expected to engage students if they want to be effective (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004). Teaching and learning are complex processes. The use of humor may be a powerful instructional resource.

University professors are often hired because of their expertise and scholarly achievements in a certain field and with the expectation they will provide effective instruction in their discipline. The emphasis in graduate school is on a deeper understanding of your subject matter. There are escalating demands in academic careers, and colleges often reward faculty for research and scholarship and undervalue teaching (Bernstein & Edwards, 2001). Colleges and universities are moving from the lip service endorsement of the importance of teaching to significant and sustained efforts to improve

instruction (Seldin, 1995). The importance of teaching is being taken more seriously, and the scholarship of teaching has been given more consideration by institutions of higher learning, state legislatures, teaching organizations, faculty, and students (Armour, 1995).

Teaching is a science and an art. We need to be knowledgeable about our disciplines and also understand the domain of teaching and learning. There are three important components to consider in teaching: the subject matter, the students, and the teachers (Palmer, 1998). Good teachers are scholars in their fields. Professors need to be aware of their own talents, skills, knowledge, and weaknesses. One obstacle we face is the idea that teaching ability is innate and the belief that some instructors are “natural teachers” (Bain, 2004). To be a good teacher requires self-knowledge and understanding. Our approach and style in the classroom reflects our individual identities. Our teaching identities should always be changing and developing. If we are aware and reflective of our strengths and weaknesses, we will be better teachers.

One important consideration is the role of humor in the classroom. Humor can reflect our identities and be an important technique for college professors to use in their classes.

#### Statement of the Problem

*What do you get when you cross a teacher with a vampire? A lot of blood tests.*

Getting a college education is often seen as a very serious endeavor. Professors spend years learning about their disciplines and are eager to share their knowledge with students. However, in a report by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (1997) more than 250,000 freshman students were surveyed; a 30-year record high 35.6%

of students said they were frequently bored in class. In 2007 UCLA researchers at the Higher Education Research Institute reported that 37% of seniors who were surveyed were “frequently bored in class” (p. 91).

Good professors struggle with how to communicate ideas effectively. We spend three hours explaining neurons and a week later only three students remember what we taught. College teachers complain students text message in class and surf the Net on their laptops. In recent years, there has been a shift in attitudes toward the adoption of a more relaxed classroom environment and an emphasis on making learning more enjoyable (Martin, 2007). Students may be more motivated to learn in a positive atmosphere (Oppliger, 2003). Various studies have focused on the physical and psychological benefits of humor in our daily lives, but professors are not trained to use humor, and it is not part of any curriculum (Berk, 2003). Professors may feel they do not have the skills to deliver jokes or witty remarks in a classroom like a stand up comedian. Teachers may also feel their subject is too serious for the use of humor (Berk, 2003). Despite the fact that teachers are reluctant to use humor in their teaching because they lack training in that area, fear looking frivolous, and don't have the necessary presentational skills, I believe humor is a valuable teaching method for establishing a classroom climate favorable for learning. Humor can serve important cognitive, psychological, and physical functions.

Research about the use of humor in the collegiate classroom is very limited (Teslow, 1995). Using humor as a teaching tool has rarely been studied systematically in controlled situation (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillman, 1980). Evaluating the educational benefits of humor has focused only on how it helps students and achieves

learning outcomes (Ziv, 1988). A few studies have examined how humor can increase comprehension, improve retention, promote creativity, and enhance performance on exams (Bryant, et al, 1980; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; McMorris, Boothroyd, & Pietrangelo, 1997; & Ziv, 1976). Creativity and imagination is required to arouse students' attention and build an atmosphere to help students learn. There are many strategies to use humor as a teaching tool, and learning can be enhanced by using content-specific humor.

Many professors use humor often in their classrooms (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, Zillman, 1980), but there is no research regarding the positive effects for the professors themselves. The research has centered on the benefits for students and the classroom climate. The value of using humor to benefit the professors may be a vital topic to examine. Persuading professors to use humor to help their students' learning or to improve the classroom climate are worthwhile reasons, but a stronger motivation for teachers might be that it will help the college professor personally.

The idea of laughter affecting physical health has been very popular in recent years. Using humor is an important aspect of human social interaction and can serve many essential interpersonal functions. A sense of humor is an important personality characteristic, and the ability to produce humor and amuse others may be viewed as an important social skill (Martin, 2007). College professors express their personalities through their use of humor. There are great individual differences in the enjoyment and creation of humor.

College teachers are concerned not only about the efficacy of their teaching on college students but also about their own teaching performance and style (Mok, 2005). Fuller's (1969) study of teachers' concerns generated a theory of development for teachers based on their years of teaching experience. In Fuller's model, in the first stage of teaching teachers are anxious about the self and their inadequacy, class control, and the opinions of students and colleagues. During the second stage, professors are concerned with mastery of teaching tasks and classroom management issues. In the third stage,

Fuller states teachers are more interested in how their teaching influences students. This theory of development is clearly not experienced equally by every teacher; however, the use of humor could affect the college professor. New teachers may be fearful to try a risky, humorous method in class. As we gain confidence and courage in our teaching style, we may try new techniques.

Educators frequently discuss the importance of promoting an environment that is conducive for learning. When a professor utilizes humor in teaching, the current prevailing belief of education suggests that students will learn more if they are happy and attentive (Oppliger, 2003). Effective teaching is more than just transmitting knowledge about a discipline and a set of techniques to convey that information (Bain, 2004). Classroom humor seems to be a random act that occurs spontaneously rather than being used intentionally to accomplish specific learning goals (Bryant, et al., 1980). We need to shift our thinking and adopt a new model where teaching occurs when learning takes place and creating the conditions in which most students will realize their potential to learn (Finkel, 2000). The professor can help to set the tone in the classroom to be



intellectually and socially stimulating (Kidd, 1976). Engaging the student in active learning and creating a positive classroom climate with a sense of community are two important goals for college professors (Kher, Molstad, & Donahue, 1999). Using humor can be valuable in establishing a classroom climate that is favorable for students and professors and to help them to make connections.

Humor can also be helpful to professors. There are numerous benefits, physically and psychologically. Despite its obvious importance in human behavior, there is no research about how humor can improve social interactions and moods for college professors. Teachers vary greatly in the degree they use humor in the classroom. Historically, education has been viewed as a solemn endeavor, and humor was not encouraged or valued. There is a growing belief that humor is significant for teachers and students.

There is a need to conduct research in order to gain an understanding of the dynamics of humor in the college classroom and how it can benefit students and professors.

#### Purpose of the Study

*Did you hear about the teacher who was injured grading tests? She was grading on a curve.*

The purpose of this study is to understand how and why college professors intentionally use humor in the classroom and what influence humor has on their teaching.

### Significance of the Study

The significance of this study will be its addition to the body of research on humor in the college classroom and its effect on teaching for college professors. Since there is a paucity of specific research about humor used by college professors, this study will help to add to the information about humor in higher education. The successful strategies for integrating humor in the classroom will be helpful to other professors.

Studying individual professors and their specific experiences may broaden the base of knowledge about how humor can improve the classroom climate and help students to learn. The study will also add insights about how humor helps the individual professor. The literature base in humor is dominated by information about how humor is beneficial for students. This study will emphasize the benefits for professors and the classroom climate. Insights could be useful for students preparing to teach and for professors who wish to add to their repertoire of teaching methods.

### Definitions

The following is a list of terms as I use them for this study:

*Humor*: “...anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus and the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it” (Martin, 2007, p. 5).

*Classroom Climate*: “...a learning environment, an ‘adult atmosphere’ for learning, a climate of mutual respect, a friendly, informal, supportive atmosphere” (Robinson, 1999, p. 56).

### Assumptions

My approach to this study will be informed by my own experiences as a teacher and a funny person. I frequently and deliberately use humor in my classroom. I have also been a student for many years. I assume this will allow me to be empathetic and understanding about the importance of classroom climate and the interaction between a student and a professor. A second assumption will be that the professors selected for this study are reflective of their teaching and insightful in the narration of their experiences about humor in the classroom.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

*Q: What's funny about teaching? A: Not enough. (Decker, 2007, p. 7).*

Humor and laughter occur in all cultures and are experienced by virtually everyone throughout the world (Lefcourt, 2001). We also know that it benefits learning. In this chapter, I will explore three important elements of the importance of humor in the college classroom. The first component will be a summary of the research about physical and psychological benefits of humor for individuals. The second element will be a discussion of techniques and ways professors use humor in their classrooms. The last part of this chapter will examine how humor can shape and influence classroom climate.

#### Physical and Psychological Benefits of Humor

The physiological effects and healing power of humor have been touted in Norman Cousins' (1979) book, *Anatomy of an Illness*. Cousins was a famous magazine editor who in the early 1960s had been diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, a painful and devastating rheumatoid disease. His doctors gave him a 1-in-500 chance of recovery. He checked himself out of the hospital and, with the support of his doctor, began a self-prescribed treatment plan of frequent laughter and high doses of vitamin C. He watched comedy movies and read joke books. He reported that laughter allowed him to have a few hours of sleep and reduced his pain over time. Cousins recovered from this disease, much to the surprise of his medical doctors. He credited the body's power of self healing and

argued that laughter helped facilitate that healing. In 1977 Cousins contracted cancer, and he again utilized the “laugh cure,” and the cancer went into remission. He suffered a near-fatal heart attack in 1980, and after his recovery, he wrote two more books describing his theories of preventing and curing illness through the use of laughter. Cousins died in 1990 from a heart attack.

The importance of humor in medicine was demonstrated in several studies in which patients who were exposed to humorous stimuli gained elevated levels of salivary immuno-globulin A (IgA), an antibody that helps our bodies to defend against infections in the respiratory system (Lefcourt, Davidson-Katz, & Kueneman, 1990; Stone, Cox, Neale, Valdimarsdottir, & Jandorf, 1987). There have also been numerous reports of a relationship between the stimulation of the immune system and reduced stress levels (Berk, Tan, Fry, Napier, Lee, Hubbard, & Lewis, 1989; Fry, 1992; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986). Martin and Dobbin (1988) found individuals with a strong sense of humor experience are less susceptible to contagious illnesses. They concluded that laughter stimulates the immune system and help to counteract the immuno-suppressive effects of stress.

Laughter and its effect on the pain threshold and pain tolerance has been a very promising line of research. College students were used in studies investigating the analgesic effects of laughter (Cogan, Cogan, Waltz, & McCue, 1987; Hudak, Dale, Hudak, & DeGood, 1991), and pain threshold and tolerance (Adams & McGuire, 1986; Weaver & Zillman, 1994), Martin (2001) examined the research and concluded that showing patients comedy increases pain threshold and tolerance, but this could be

distraction from the illness. However, Schmitt (1990) studied 35 patients with traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, arthritis, limb amputations, and other neurological and muscular disorders, and he reported that 74% of the patients agreed with a statement that laughing works as well as a pain pill. This was a small study of patients in a rehabilitation hospital, and the surveys indicated patients welcome laughter, and coupled with their therapy, found laughter could be helpful with pain and improvement of their moods.

Cogan (Provine, 2000) explored how humor can affect pain reduction. She found subjects who watched a Lily Tomlin video or underwent a relaxation procedure before a painful medical procedure tolerated more discomfort than other patients. Laughter can also stimulate endorphins and can allow for a greater tolerance to pain (Panksepp, 1998).

Another study on the relationship between blood pressure and a sense of humor considered the correlations between participants' scores on the Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ) and the Coping Humor Scale (CHS) and their SBP and DBP levels in a series of laboratory tasks (Lefcourt, Davidson, Shepherd, Phillips, Prkachin, & Mills, 1995). The researchers did not find any significant correlations on the questionnaires and DBP, but they did find a pattern of sex differences in the humor scales and SBP. Women with higher scores on the humor measures were found to have generally lower levels of SBP than women with lower scores. Men, however, with higher humor scores had higher overall levels of SBP. The authors suggest that these differences could be attributed to differences in the way men and women express humor. They found that women express humor in more tolerant and self-accepting ways, and this may be more beneficial physically. However, the men who had higher humor scores may reflect

more competitiveness and aggressiveness, and this resulted in more elevated blood pressure readings. These findings may suggest that different styles of humor may have different health outcomes.

In addition to these physical benefits of humor, Steele (1998) points out how laughing stimulates the body's production of catecholamines. These compounds in the body include neurotransmitters which can stimulate alertness and energy. Other catecholamines contain the neurotransmitter dopamine which is essential for cognitive functioning. One experimental study explored the effect of laughter in the cardiac rehabilitation of patients with myocardial infarction (post-MI). The treatment included one year of bimonthly treatments with standard cardiac medication plus a humorous video compared with a control group who received just the medication. The group who watched the video exhibited fewer arrhythmias, lower blood pressure, lower urinary and plasma catecholamines, and lower dosage of beta blockers (Tan, Tan, Berk, Lukeman, & Lukeman, 1997).

The health benefits of humor can be more complex than it may first appear. Fry (1994) has suggested that vigorous laughter can trigger muscular activity in various parts of the body and can burn calories and enhance pulmonary functions. Several studies have documented the aerobic benefits of laughter and how it can reduce feelings of anxiety (Clay, 1997; Prerost, 1988). Fry (1994) found that when pleasurable emotion is detected in the brain's limbic system and other parts of the autonomic nervous system, the heart rate and sympathetic arousal is a sort of cardiac work-out.

The use of humor can also serve a number of social, emotional, and cognitive functions (Martin, 2007). Humor is a social phenomenon and even though we can laugh when we are alone, it is usually in response to a character in a book or television program. The social context of humor has been called play, and humor has been identified as a way for people and some primates to interact (Martin & Kuiper, 1999). A good sense of humor may allow a person to be viewed as more socially competent and an individual may have stronger, more intimate relationships (Cohen & Wills, 1985). An individual who utilizes humor in their everyday life may develop interpersonal relationships with a more positive outlook on life (Martin, 2002). Another psychological benefit of humor can be a reduction of depression (Danzer, Dale, & Kliens, 1990; Deaner & McConatha, 1993; Leiber, 1986; Porterfield, 1987). Danzer and her colleagues (1990) induced sad moods in female college students and randomly assigned them to listen to either a stand-up comedy tape, a nonhumorous audiotape, or no tape at all. The female undergraduates all reported significant increases in self-reported sadness and depressed moods after the mood induction. The participants who heard the humorous tape showed a significant post-treatment reduction in depression back to the baseline levels. This suggests humor counteracted the depressed mood. Participants in another experiment watched a four-minute humorous video and then reported a significant reduction in their feelings of anxiety and depression relative to a baseline level (Moran, 1996). Szabo, Ainsworth, and Danks (2005) compared three groups and their moods by contrasting the effects of watching a comedy video, running on a treadmill for 20 minutes, or watching a non-humorous documentary movie. The comedy video produced the most significant



reductions in anxiety and emotional distress. Exercise also lowered the anxiety and negative mood levels more than the non-humorous control video. These experiments provided consistent evidence of the short term effects of humor to reduce depression.

A research study observed 1,200 people laughing spontaneously in their natural environments (Provine, 2000). They recorded the gender of the speaker (the person speaking immediately before the laughter), the audience, whether the audience and the speaker laughed, and what the speaker said directly before the laughter. They found that the speakers laughed more than 50 percent more than their audiences, and only about 10 to 20 percent of the laughter episodes were jokes or specific jests. They confirmed that the critical stimulus for laughter is not a joke, but another person. Provine (2000) also continued his research and asked his students to record their laughter in diaries and the circumstances of their reaction. Laughter was 30 times more frequent in social rather than solitary circumstances.

Employees who have a good sense of humor are popular with their employers because of the health benefits of this personality characteristic. Sultanoff (2007) quotes an international survey that states only 15% of workers are fired because of a lack of competence. The remaining 85% were dismissed because of the inability to get along with other employees. An important attribute for an effective employee is a good sense of humor. In an article in *Training and Development*, management consultant William Hodge surveyed 329 company executives and reported that 97% felt humor is valuable in business, and 60% felt a sense of humor could be a determining factor in an individual's success in the business world. Another research survey reported 84% of personnel

directors stated that employees with a sense of humor do better work. They also reported employees with a strong sense of humor used fewer sick days (Braverman, 1993). One study showed that 98% of chief executives would hire a person with a good sense of humor over a person who lacked a sense of humor, and the employees who have the most fun on their jobs are more productive and more likely to be promoted (Goodman, 1995).

Humor can also reduce emotional distress. Psychologists have recognized the cognitive processing necessary for humor, but the emotional nature of humor can trigger changes in the brain, autonomic nervous system, endocrine system and neurological structures (Fry, 1994). A psychological component is the emotional nature of humor. Exposure to humorous stimuli can produce an increase in a positive mood (Szabo, 2003), and the limbic system of the brain is activated when viewing funny cartoons (Mobbs, Greicius, Abdel-Azim, Menon, & Reiss, 2003). The link between laughter and well being is a recent development in humor research. Scientists taught a group of 33 employees how to “induce their own natural laughter” (Beckman, Regier, & Young, 2007). Rather than telling jokes, the researchers taught deep-breathing techniques and made outlandish, silly sounds that produced belly laughs by the participants. Even the contrived laughter produced the physical effects of improved circulation and stretching of skeletal muscles. The participants practiced “laughing” for three weeks each morning for 15 minutes. The group reported more positive emotions, better optimism, and greater social identification. The effects lasted 90 days later.

Another link between humor and coping with emotional distress involved cancer patients (Carver, Pozo, Harris, Noriega, Scheier, Robinson, Ketcham, Moffat, & Clark,

1993). A group of women diagnosed and treated for breast cancer were studied regarding their levels of distress. Over the following year, the researchers were able to predict the women's levels of stress by studying their use of humor and also with their level of optimism. The women, who were more optimistic and also more likely to indulge in humor about their illnesses, seemed to be less distressed over that time period. Emotional distress can cause diminished activity in the immune system and may also speed the growth of tumors (Sklar and Anisman, 1979; Visintainer, Volpicelli, & Seligman, 1982). Maslow (1970) defined the self actualized human as having a philosophical, non-hostile sense of humor. Laughter and humor can produce a positive experience related to self actualization by creating new and innovative perspectives. Laughter and a sense of humor may contribute to improved interpersonal functions and contribute to emotional health. Self-enhancing humor is defined as the ability to maintain perspective even in the face of stress or adversity (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) has been developed by Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003). Research using the HSQ has been used in a series of studies with large samples of participants between the ages of 14 and 87. The HSQ assesses dimensions of humor not measured by previous tests. The focus of this questionnaire is to distinguish between potentially beneficial and detrimental humor styles. A beneficial humor style was found to be self-enhancing and affiliative for the individual. A detrimental humor style was more aggressive and self-defeating. There are two positive and two negative styles of humor that can be reported from the four eight-item scales. Individuals reporting high scores on the beneficial scales of humor are generally positively related to indicators

of psychological health, such as optimism, social support, and intimacy. Participants with high scores on the aggressive and self-defeating humor scales generally demonstrate psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, and hostility. Humor can also promote feelings of self esteem (Shade, 1996). Ziv (1990) stated humor could be an indicator of leadership IQ. It has been suggested that a good sense of humor is an important trait for leadership. Individuals who are strong leaders with a high leadership IQ might demonstrate good communication skills, have the ability to influence people, and have the ability to make decisions by seeking information from other people. Humor can be beneficial for leaders. Bellert (1989) claims humor can restore hope and energy for individuals. She has promoted the therapeutic use of humor by nurses for cancer patients through evaluation and assessment of patients and their families. As a nurse, Bellert utilizes humor as a coping and healing mechanism for caregivers and patients. She advocates humor to improve communication between staff members and to prevent burn-out on oncology units. Bellert promotes humor through a humor library of books, videos, costumes, and cartoons.

In addition, there is research recognizing people who laugh more have better coping mechanisms and how cheerful people seem to have a higher quality of life and greater life satisfaction (Svebak, Martin, and Holman, 2004). Humor has also been shown to improve self esteem (Kuiper & Martin, 1993).

To produce and understand humor an individual must mentally process information. Humor can significantly affect other cognitive processes, especially memory and creativity. Both humor and creativity depend on an individual's ability to combine

different domains of information or knowledge (Koestler, 1964). Can humor improve memory? Schmidt (1994) conducted a study where 38 psychology undergraduates read sentences like this: “There are three ways a man can wear his hair: parted, unparted, and departed.” He also had them read sentences that were phrased in this way: “Men can wear their hair with or without a part, unless they are bald.” The students were tested and remembered the funny sentences better than they recalled the serious ones.

Garner (2006) studied undergraduates in a distance education course and found that participants who were exposed to lectures containing humor with relevant content had increased retention of the content as measured by examination scores, compared with lower scores for those who received the same material without the infusion of humor.

In another study with online instruction, students were randomly assigned to a standard section of a general psychology course or to a class enhanced with humorous content (LoSchiavo & Shatz, 2005). The results found humor significantly influenced student interest and participation, but humor did not affect course performance overall.

Understanding a joke uses similar cognitive processes involved in solving a problem (Svebak, 1982). The left hemisphere deciphers the verbal content of a joke, and the right hemisphere interprets whether it is funny or not. Humor is a whole-brain experience and the brain must pass signals quickly and efficiently to help us understand a joke. The two stages of processing a joke are: (1) recognition of the incongruity in the humor which is similar to identifying a problem; (2) resolution or understanding the punchline which is related to solving the problem (Suls, 1972).

“Each humor event you experience makes you grow a little bit—as the brain has expanded and taken on new connections” (Fry, quoted in Ferber, 2006, p. 103). By studying patients with brain injuries, neurologists found the right frontal lobe was critical for determining what was funny. Two neuropsychologists, Shammi and Stuss (2003) tested 21 patients with brain damage either in the right frontal lobe or another brain region by showing them humorous statements or signs. The patients with damaged right prefrontal cortexes were unable to appreciate the humor. The other patients laughed at the humor that required thoughtful processing. All of the patients laughed at slapstick humor.

The scientific hunt for the brain’s humor location continued when healthy individuals were placed in front of televisions while their brains were scanned by MRI machines. Neurologists scanned a number of subjects’ brains while they rated 47 *Far Side* and 53 *New Yorker* cartoons for their degree of humor by a handheld machine. These neurologists proposed humor sharpened our brains and intuition. Two parts of the frontal lobe worked harder when the people rated some cartoons as funnier than other cartoons. These same two regions, in the left prefrontal and in the mesolimbic areas of the brain, are also activated when we experience complex emotions, such as love, lust, and guilt. These brain structures involve the emotion related areas of the brain. Humor triggers a pleasurable emotion in the mesolimbic reward center. The neurologists believe complex humor may recalibrate our intuition and help us to make better social decisions in more emotionally stable individuals or make wrong judgments in individuals who have lower levels of activation in the mesolimbic reward circuitry (Allman, Watson, Tetreault, & Hakeem, 2005).

Learning to laugh is also important, according to William Fry (1992), who reports that children laugh 300 times a day, and adults laugh just 17 times. He believes we don't stop laughing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop laughing.

Humor and creativity often involve a change in perspective and a new way of looking at things. Ziv (1976) engaged in a number of experiments providing evidence that exposure to humor improves a person's creative potential. He compared the scores of tenth grade students on two tests of verbal creativity. One group had listened to a recording of a popular comedian and the other group engaged in a non-humorous activity. The students who heard the comedian obtained significantly higher scores on measures of fluency, flexibility, originality, and overall creative potential.

Humor can also strengthen creativity by allowing for the expression of emotions in a constructive manner. One psychological function of humor is to allow for the channeling of emotions (Hillman, 2001). Humor was one of the coping strategies used by concentration camp survivors and described by Frankl (1984). Struggling with extreme and uncontrollable conditions, the prisoners used humor to maintain their emotional health by telling amusing stories, mocking the guards, and joking about their future lives after the war. The affective domain can strongly influence the learner's cognitive abilities to acquire information. Using emotions help get the brain's attention and emotionally arousing behaviors tend to be better remembered than neutral events (Medina, 2008).

Television commercials and charity appeals for donations tend to be more vividly recalled when emotional components are used. Emotions like surprise and even anger can arouse our attention and help us to learn (Heath & Heath, 2007). Positive emotions tend

to broaden an individual's focus and allow for more creative problem solving, and negative emotions narrow one's focus of attention (Fredrickson, 1998).

Another creativity study was conducted where people either watched a comedy film or were exposed to an emotionally neutral or negative video. The subjects who were exposed to comedy exhibited more creative responses and enhanced problem solving (Mednick, 1962). Enhanced creative thinking and problem solving are important because growth of flexible thought processes may develop more divergent thinking (Belanger, Kirkpatrick, & Derks, 1998).

Isen, Daubman, and Nowicki (1987) also conducted a study about the benefits of humor in improving creativity. They showed one group of undergraduates funny episodes from old TV shows, and the control group did not watch any videos. Then they asked both groups to solve a challenging problem with a burning candle, a book of matches, and a box of tacks. The groups were given ten minutes to attach the candle to the wall without dripping the wax. The subjects who were exposed to the TV comedy programs were three times as likely to find the correct and creative answer. The answer? (Dump the tacks from the box, tack the box to the wall, and use the box as a candle holder.)

Another study found similar results as a benefit of humor for creativity. Students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were shown videos of comical penguins waddling, or the control group was shown neutral videos of sticks. The penguin watchers were more creative and flexible in their problem solving and also had more positive feelings about completing a visual processing task and verbal assessment test (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).



Torrance and Safter (1999) argue that becoming more creative is a positive attribute for individuals because it allows us to confront problems from a new perspective, solve problems with several possible methods, find gaps in information, discover mysteries, produce new solutions, re-frame old ideas to become new ideas, produce innovations, and make discoveries. As Koestler (1964) once stated: “Ha-Ha can lead to Ah-Ha!”

Humor has also been examined in studies about resilience. Scheier and Carver (1985, 1992) implicated optimism and a sense of humor as important characteristics to help people survive under adverse conditions. A recently published account of Sir Ernest Shackleton’s expedition to the Antarctic is called *The Endurance* (Alexander, 1998). This book describes the ordeal experienced by Shackleton and his men which began in 1914. Their ship became trapped in ice and stranded for over a year and a half without any contact from the outside world, and they had to be self sufficient and survive terrible hardships. Shackleton was brilliant in selecting his crew, not just for their skills in navigation and science, but for their ability to get along with others. He sought out people who could sing, play musical instruments, and perform entertainment. During the journey Shackleton was vigilant if anyone had negative morale problems and would keep him away from the other crew members and provide him with better quarters, so his bad mood would not spread to the others. He encouraged the crew to have nightly entertainments for each other, and this bolstered their morale. Shackleton’s diary is filled with stories of laughter from the crew members as they entertained and parodied each other during their suffering. The psychological emphasis on optimism, morale, and encouraging humor helped them to survive (Lefcourt, 2001).

Individuals who use humor are associated with more activity and self monitoring than people who use humor less frequently. Self monitoring is a concept proposed by Snyder (1974) where people regulate their own behavior in order to “look good” and improve their perceptions by others in a favorable manner. Turner (1980) found that high self monitoring people were able to fit into different situations and had higher interpersonal skills than low self monitors. College students who engaged in self monitoring of their expressive behaviors described themselves as frequent initiators of humor, and in a regression analysis study investigators found self monitoring to be the strongest predictor of humor in the students (Bell, McGhee, & Duffey, 1986). These self monitoring behaviors indicated the students who were high monitors had more positive mood states and better coping styles. Humor can provide a sense of empowerment and control (Sherman, 1998).

Can humor reduce the impact of stress? Results from three studies by Lefcourt (2001) provided support for the relationship between stress and a sense of humor. Subjects with high scores on humor measures, including the Profile of Mood States (McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1971), Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (Martin & Lefcourt, 1984), Sense of Humor Questionnaire (Svebak, 1974), and Coping Humor Scale (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983) experienced weaker relationships between stress and negative life events than individuals with a less well-developed sense of humor.

College students may experience stress caused by the demands of the classroom and also the stress in their personal lives. They may experience burn-out due to a sense of powerlessness. Laughter may allow an individual to feel they have a sense of control over

a situation and can detach from their stressors. This can increase a person's resilience to the high levels of stress that can lead to burnout (Talbot & Lumden, 2000).

While there is a great deal of research supporting the specific biological, social, and cognitive ways that humor can enhance health, there is also a common sense understanding that humor is beneficial to all aspects of life. I turn now to an examination of the educational benefits of humor.

### How Professors Use Humor

Carl Rogers (1983) presented a theory of student-centered teaching where the learner is in the process of becoming. The teacher's role is to facilitate the learning experience and allow the student to grow and develop. The teacher is concerned with sharing knowledge and shifts the focus from what the teacher does, to what is happening with the student, and the interaction between the teacher and student. The importance of the relationship between the learner and facilitator is a central element for meaningful learning and requires the teacher to be warm, genuine, trusting, and empathetic (Quinn, 1995). Humanistic teaching centers on the need for humans to share, care, communicate, and laugh (Watson, 2009).

Professors use many techniques to utilize humor in their classrooms, to include: jokes, quotations, questions, examples, cartoons, multiple choice items, top 10 lists, anecdotes, skits, dramatizations, planned ad-libs, analogies, metaphors, paradoxes, irony, problems, game show formats, visual gags, auditory, props, stories, thoughts for the day, and videos. In this section, I will discuss how techniques like these are used in the college classroom and to what effect.

In *Professors Are from Mars, Students Are from Snickers*, Berk (2003) states there are two categories for humor in the classroom: high risk and low risk. He defines risk as the possibility of “bombing” or “dying” in front of a classroom audience. If a professor is humiliated or embarrassed because the humor fails, this is a high risk experience. If a professor does not get a laugh, students may feel empathetic and tolerant, but they may also be disappointed or disconcerted. Professional comedians might “bomb” and the result is still funny. Telling a joke is an example of high risk humor. Using spontaneous humor or an ad-lib to respond to someone in the classroom is another high risk type of humor. The ad-lib can be spontaneous and it may be distracting.

In low risk humor the chance of failure is reduced. If the students do not think the material is funny, the professor does not suffer. Examples of seven basic types of low risk humor, according to Berk (2003), are: quotations and questions, cartoons, multiple-choice items, top 10 lists, anecdotes, skits or dramatizations, and planned ad-libs that are not spontaneous.

Matthews and Hattam (2004) explore the idea of humor as pedagogy and place Zen, a Buddhist concept of self discipline, as a focal point. They express the belief that humor is not seen as a critical element in a study of teaching adults, in educational practices, or curriculum development. According to Matthews and Hattam (2004), highlighting the practices of paradox, irony, incongruity, unconventionality, dissolution of dualisms, and deployment of radical skepticism are important teaching strategies and they feel that humor is a part of critical pedagogy.

Philosophically and psychologically there are three theories explaining the phenomenon of humor (Hillman, 2001; James, 2001; Matthews & Hattam, 2004). The first theory is called Incongruity theory, and the source of humor is surprise or unexpectedness. This perspective may be described as placing inconsistent or inappropriate ideas together and creating a sudden surprise. This form of humor may be generated by shock or trickery. We may cognitively attempt to understand the joke or the punch line. If something is not the way we expect it to be, it's incongruous. One way I have utilized this approach to humor was in a Social Psychology class by sitting in the back of the classroom wearing headphones and playing solitaire. After a few minutes my students began to comment: "What is she doing?" "Are we going to have class?" "Why is she sitting back there?" After a few minutes I stood up and began a discussion about social roles and expectations. What do we expect from a teacher? How are teachers supposed to act? What happens when we do not follow our social roles? My behavior was not what they expected and thus it was incongruous.

The Superiority theory and Relief theory are also perspectives of humor. Two Australian researchers, Matthews and Hattam (2004), examined theories of humor that represent a difference in expectation and actuality which is a major aim of critical pedagogy. Superiority theory focuses on an imbalance of power. This perspective can be seen in the work of Aristotle and Plato. A teacher may ridicule or use insult and sarcasm, but the Superiority theory seems to offer little benefit for instruction. Sometimes I use ridicule when I show my General Psychology class "The Stroop Effect." This is a visual test that shows the interfering effects of incompatible responses to the same stimuli. I

begin by showing a slide that has a series of colored squares, and I ask them to call out the names of the colors as a class when I point to them. I point to them very quickly, and they do very well naming the colors. For the second slide they must read the names of the colors as printed. They are able to do this very rapidly. For the third slide I tell them to ignore the printed words and simply name the color *in which the words are printed*. Students will tend to get behind very quickly as I point to the words. The meaning of the stimuli interferes with direct perception of their physical characteristics. I might say, “Are you stupid?” “At what age did you learn your colors?” Then I tell the students I am just teasing.

The Relief theory is the next theory and is based on the concept of humor as a way of releasing energy or repressed, forbidden thoughts. Freud’s (1905) work about humor is an example. He argued that adults disguise their aggressive or sexual anxieties through jokes and humor. Freud also believed the pleasure experienced in humor was derived from psychic release and humor had healthy and adaptive functions. Professors can use laughter and humor to open lines of communication for students to allow them to express their tension. In General Psychology class, I teach a chapter about sexual motivation. I begin the lecture by describing research reported by Clark and Hatfield (1989). They used student researchers who were of “average” physical attractiveness and the women researchers would ask the men participants, and the men student researchers would ask the women participants a question. I ask my students the same questions that Clark and Hatfield used. What if you were walking across campus, and a guy or young woman

comes up to you and says: “Hi! I’ve been noticing you around campus, and I find you to be very attractive. Would you go out on a date with me tonight?” I ask my students what percentage of male students said, “OK!” and what percentage of female students said, “OK!” Then I let them guess the percentages that Clark and Hatfield reported. Then I ask them to guess what the percentages were if the student researcher asked: “Hi! I’ve been noticing you around campus, and I find you to be very attractive. Would you come to my apartment tonight?” We again guess the percentages. The final question asked of students at State University of New York was: “Hi! I’ve been noticing you around campus, and I find you to be very attractive. Would you go to bed with me tonight?” This research allows us to begin our chapter by discussing gender differences, changes in sexual behavior in different decades when the research was performed, sexually transmitted diseases, and other issues. By discussing sexual behavior and research on college campuses, I have allowed students to express some of their concerns and anxieties.

One example of using humor is the telling of a joke. In the Child Development course I teach, we frequently discuss how difficult it is to be a parent, and I share this joke with the class:

GOD'S CHILDREN

*Whenever your kids are out of control, you can take comfort from the thought that even God's omnipotence did not extend to God's kids.*

*After creating heaven and earth, God created Adam and Eve. And the first thing he said was: “Don't.”*

*“Don't what?” Adam replied.*

*“Don't eat the forbidden fruit.” God said.*

*“Forbidden fruit? We got forbidden fruit? Hey, Eve...we got forbidden fruit!*

*“No way!”*

*“Yes way!”*

*"Don't eat that fruit!" said God.*

*"Why?"*

*"Because I am your Father and I said so!" said God wondering why he hadn't stopped after making the elephants.*

*A few minutes later God saw his kids having an apple break and was angry.*

*"Didn't I tell you not to eat the fruit?" the First Parent asked.*

*"Uh huh," Adam replied.*

*"Then why did you?"*

*"I dunno," Eve answered.*

*"She started it!" Adam said.*

*"Did not!"*

*"Did too!"*

*"DID NOT!"*

*Having had it with the two of them, God's punishment was that Adam and Eve should have children of their own. Thus, the pattern was set and it has never changed.*

*But there is reassurance in this story. If you have persistently and lovingly tried to give them wisdom and they haven't taken it, don't be hard on yourself. If God had trouble handling children, what makes you think it would be a piece of cake for you? C.Gongre (personal communication, April 15, 2004)*

This joke not only gets my students to laugh, it also serves as a springboard to serious discussion about child development.

Professors can also use humor with an analogy or metaphor. Using vivid metaphors that are relevant to students' interests can be effective in assimilating information. Using analogies or metaphors can help an instructor relate an unfamiliar idea to something more familiar (Gardner, 2006). To explain the information processing theory of memory, I compare a human brain to a computer. I show pictures of a brain and a computer and describe how we encode, store, and retrieve information and, in a similar fashion, the way a computer will function and operate with processing information. To demonstrate the analogy of a brain with a computer, the colorful and somewhat silly pictures show a



student typing on a computer keyboard and then the student's brain is also a computer that is encoding, storing, and retrieving information.

Another way to motivate students is to make learning fun. Using a game show format can liven up academic material and engage student interest. These games use a question and answer format that helps students to prepare for exams or review difficult information (Wright, 2006). Kroehnert (1991) found incorporating play through the use of games in the classroom made learning fun for students and professors. Using critical thinking skills in games enhances the learning process. I have used "Jeopardy," "Who Wants to be a Millionaire," and "Are You Smarter Than a 5<sup>th</sup> Grader?" These games generate excitement in my classes. The students are able to take turns answering questions or work in teams to generate the answers. I also play the musical themes from "Jeopardy" and "Millionaire." I post the categories on a Powerpoint slide and then ask the questions. Sometimes I give them play money called "Buckman's Bucks." Test reviews seem to be somewhat boring, but using a game show format has been very successful in my classes. Students can also determine which areas they need to study for an exam if they have missed several questions in one category.

Shade (1996) described four different kinds of humor for the classroom: figural (comic books, cartoons, caricatures); verbal (jokes, limericks, riddles, satire, puns); visual (impressions, mime, sight gags, slapstick); and auditory (noises, sounds, and impersonations). I often use cartoons in my Powerpoint slides and in my study guides. One research study evaluated the use of content-relevant cartoons as an instructional tool

(Sadowski & Gulgoz, 1994). Students in a social psychology class were given cartoon examples at the beginning of each lecture period. They discussed the cartoons and referred to the material prior to the classroom exam. The results of the study indicated relevant humorous cartoons had a positive impact, were enjoyable, enhanced the class atmosphere, and were a beneficial learning aid. There was a higher passing rate in the class where the cartoon examples were utilized than in previous classes in which the technique was not employed. Cartoon examples may provide more flexible thinking (Koestler, 1964).

An example of a pun I use is about Freudian slips. A definition of a Freudian slip is accidental speech or behavior that is thought to reveal unconscious beliefs or thoughts. I explain to my students that: “A Freudian slip is when you mean one thing, and you say your mother.” The students may groan, but they will understand a Freudian slip. I also use auditory humor as we discuss anti-social personality disorder, and I use a power point slide that begins with a scream. To help my classes to learn about classical conditioning, I use an air horn to condition them to be afraid of me putting my hand in my pocket. This technique keeps them awake and is very memorable.

The use of props (clown noses or hats), asking students to devise rap songs, or develop advertisements may help students learn in the classroom (Mitchell & McNally, 2004). You can present recognition awards for a hall of fame or “Academy Award” certificates. I even put stickers on my students’ papers sometimes, and they love getting a dinosaur or a flower!

Teacher narratives are another way to introduce humor in the classroom. Examples of narratives could be myths, legends, fairy tales, fantasies, or personal anecdotes. These story-like descriptions could enhance a teacher's effectiveness by making an explanation more dramatic or significant (Holloday, 1984). One personal story that I share with my classes is when I am teaching the memory chapter of general psychology. We discuss many mnemonics or memory tricks that may help them become better students. The use of elaborative memory is when you make new information meaningful or tie it to something you already know and have in memory. When my youngest son was in kindergarten, he was required to learn ten important pieces of information to be promoted to first grade. The necessary information was his full name, birth date, address, phone number, the alphabet, primary colors, shapes, etc. Our address at that time was 6503 South 218<sup>th</sup> East Avenue, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. My son could not read yet, and this was a difficult address! I used elaborative memory by teaching my son the address by singing a popular song, "Happy Birthday." I sang: "65-03, South 218<sup>th</sup> East Avenue, Broken Ar-row, Oklahoma!" I told my son that this was important information his teacher would ask him to be promoted to first grade, and he needed to learn his address. I sang it about three times while I pointed the address out on a piece of paper. My son walked around the house singing his address. Every day or two I would ask him his home address, and we would sing it together. One day his teacher called me and told me he had done very well on his first grade test information, but she asked: why did he sing his address? I told her to look at the difficulty of our address. She began to laugh, and a few weeks later I was in the school, and she called me into the classroom. She called on a girl

student to tell me her home address. The little girl sang her address to the tune of “Happy Birthday!” The teacher thanked me because many of her students had long and difficult addresses, so she was using the mnemonic with them. The class then shares other mnemonics they use in their lives.

One of the best ways to use humor as a technique is by giving examples. Here are a few examples of true dissertation titles (Jonas, 2004). As Dave Barry would write, “I am not making this up.” Did you know that comedian Bill Cosby received an Ed.D. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1977 for a dissertation called: *An Integration of Visual Media via “Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids” into the Elementary School Curriculum as a Teaching Aid and Vehicle to Achieve Increased Learning?* Here are a few other examples of important dissertation titles:

- *Classification of Drinking Styles Using the Topographical Components of Beer Drinking*
- *Garage Sales as Practice*
- *Things That Are Good and Things That Are Chocolate: A Cultural Model of Weight Control as Morality*
- *There’s No Excuse for Chocolate Pizza* (Creguer, 1991, p. 4-5)

Using humorous examples is one way to illustrate concrete and abstract content during classes. Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) found evidence that students have better recall of funny examples than they do of serious examples. They found humorous examples were associated with positive emotions, garnered students’ attention, influenced retrieval strategies, and were rehearsed more than non-humorous material. Kaplan and Pascoe

tested for comprehension by using three versions of a lecture. One version used humorous examples in the lecture, one form of the lecture had unrelated humor, and the third had mixed examples of the concepts. Humor did not help with immediate recall of the information, but when the students were re-tested six weeks later, groups viewing the lectures with the concept-related humor did significantly better recalling the examples. Are individuals more likely to remember my dissertation title of: *Why Did the Professor Cross the Road?: How and Why College Professors Intentionally Use Humor in their Teaching* or would they remember: *The Methods and Causes of the Deliberate Utilization of Jocularly by College Professors in their Natural Environment to Heighten Pedagogical Effectiveness?*

The use of humor in education may help students who may have unrealistic expectations of their own performances. Robinson (1995) points out when professors relate humorous personal experiences, they may describe mistakes they have made. This may allow students to take themselves less seriously and view the instructor as a real person with faults and shortcomings.

Short videos from You tube or online sources can provide current newsworthy information. These videos can be humorous. Video clips or songs from movies can also introduce a topic for the day in class. I show a You tube video for my lifespan developmental psychology class that shows a giraffe in quicksand experiencing the Kubler-Ross five stages of death and dying. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) outlined five emotional states of grief. On the video a giraffe is shown trapped in quicksand and a

silent film type of sign says: “Stage 1: Denial” with dramatic organ music playing. The giraffe is shown talking and saying that he cannot believe he is stuck in quicksand, it is probably not even quicksand, and he will have a good laugh with the boys about this tonight. The next sign states: “Stage 2: Anger,” and the giraffe is cursing and saying that this is just great, stupid jungle, stupid quicksand, and more curse words that are bleeped out. “Stage 3: Bargaining” is the next sign, and the giraffe is sinking lower in the quicksand and he says: “God, this is Giraffe, and if you rescue me, no more peeing on the shorter animals. I promise.” The next sign has “Stage 4: Depression,” and the giraffe is shown crying and sobbing very sadly. “Stage 5: Acceptance” is the last sign, and the giraffe can just barely be seen in the quicksand pit. He says he is ok with this situation, and heaven will probably have all the best green leaves to eat, and everyone will have their own slurpee machine. He then says, “Wait, I think I have touched the bottom!” This video reinforces the five stages I have presented, and the story gives an example of an individual experiencing each stage.

Neuliep (1991) conducted a large scale survey of teachers and the ways they used humor. He developed a ranking of categories which included: (1) teacher-directed humor (e.g., describing an embarrassing personal experience); (2) student-targeted humor (e.g., teasing a student about a mistake); (3) untargeted humor (e.g., joke-telling or punning); (4) external source humor (e.g., showing a cartoon); (5) nonverbal humor (e.g., making a funny face or body humor).

How many times per hour does the average college class laugh? Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman (1979) found the average number for college professors teaching at large

universities usually had three to four laughs per hour. However, in their study 20% of professors had no laughter, and 13% of the professors had seven or more times in one hour. One professor had 16 laughs in one hour! In the same study they found the type of humor that produced the laughs and 39% were funny stories, 18% were humorous remarks, 17% were jokes, 8% puns, and 1% riddles. Using relevant humor items 3-4 times in an hour in college statistics and psychology classes significantly increased final exam scores over control groups who had no planned humor (Ziv, 1976, 1983, 1988). Comparing college classrooms with other education or training sessions, Goodrich, Henry, and Goodrich (1954) looked at humorous comments during psychiatric training sessions at a teaching hospital. They found there were four to five humorous remarks for laughs in a 50 minute session. Sociologist Rose Coser (1960) recorded about five laughs in each of twenty 50 minute sessions of case presentations in a didactic medical setting.

The topics of humor in the Bryant et al (1979) study were found to be sexual comments 13% of the time and hostile humor accounted for 32% of the remarks. They found that 45% of the humor was not innocent, playful, or nice. The good news is that of the 234 laughter-evoking responses in this study, 54 % were *extremely related* to content and only 18% were not at all related. The students felt 45% of the humor contributed to the educational point and only 6% distracted from the content purpose.

Communications researcher Jennings Bryant and his colleague, Dolf Zillman, (Stambor, 2006) examined the effectiveness of humor in a 22 study research project from 1969 to 2000 and found humor can make the learning experience more pleasant, but it must be attuned to the students' knowledge and also enhance the students' attention.

They suggested that humor be interspersed throughout the lesson to improve the classroom climate and lower students' anxieties.

One fascinating three year study was conducted to systematically examine different strategies to use humor as a teaching tool (Berk, 1996). The students were 316 students enrolled in three undergraduate and five graduate introductory statistics classes at a university school of nursing. The ten humor strategies were: (a) humorous material on syllabi; (b) descriptors, cautions, and warnings on the covers of handouts; (c) opening jokes; (d) spontaneous humor; (e) humorous questions; (f) skits/dramatizations; (g) humorous problem sets; (h) game show type reviews; (i) humorous examples; and (j) humorous material on exams. The study used student ratings at the end of the courses to assess the extent that each strategy met the following three learning outcomes: reduced anxiety, improved the ability to learn, and made it possible to perform at one's best on problems and exams. The results of the study found both the undergraduate and graduate students ranked all ten of the strategies as Very Effective to Extremely Effective on the three learning outcomes. The differences among the median ratings reported were not significant. Berk (1996) concluded the students felt humor was an effective teaching tool, a variety of strategies are helpful, and the techniques should be well planned and connected to specific content. He also found humor was more effective if two or more of the senses were involved, especially written and oral, rather than just one sense.

Another study compared two surveys about humor in the classroom (White, 2001). The first survey was mailed to 365 university teachers in fourteen Arkansas universities and colleges. It had a 35 percent response rate. The second survey questioned over 200



juniors and seniors at 65 different institutions and had a 100 percent response rate. The professors and students agreed humor could be used to relieve stress, to gain attention, and to create a healthy atmosphere and over 80 percent of both groups agreed that these were appropriate uses of humor. Both groups also believed humor should not be used to embarrass, intimidate, or retaliate against students with a 70 percent disapproval rating. An item on the surveys with the greatest variance concerned how to use humor to handle an unpleasant situation, and the faculty members rated the use of humor in this situation as appropriate only 15 percent of the time and the 59 percent of the students felt it was suitable.

Using humor in a syllabus and on tests seems to have controversial results. College syllabi seem to be very boring. Berk (2003) uses humor in a syllabus to relieve anxiety and set the stage for the course. The syllabus conveys important elements which serves as the “contract” for the students and professors in the course. Many professors view this first impression of the class as too serious to use humor. The language and degrees listed on the syllabus may be intimidating to students and may cause anxiety. Berk tries to break down these barriers in the syllabus by making the course and his own qualifications more approachable. He also utilizes humor on hand-outs and in test questions, but he stresses that the questions should be very relevant to the testing material. However, McMorris, Boothroyd, and Pietrangelo (1997) found that using humor in test items caused anxiety and stress for students and influenced their performance. Humorous test questions used to decrease anxiety may not be well received by college age or adult students (Korobkin, 1989). In a study by Torok, McMorris and Lin (2004), even though

only 2 percent of students advised against the use of humor in classrooms, 44 percent were against humor on tests.

Beyond using humor in instructional activities, starting each class with something funny can help relax the students and create a better atmosphere for the day. It might be a “thought for the day” or “quote of the day,” or I invite students to bring in cartoons or a joke about the topic of study. This could help to settle down the students when they may not be eager to quiet down (Lundberg & Thurston, 1992). I have a folder filled with Pavlov jokes, Freud cartoons, and other psychology topics. In books and movies an attention grabber is called a hook. Hunter (1982) calls an attention getter or hook, the “set.” The set is those actions, activities, or experiences that engage students and their emotions in the learning process and focus their minds on the topic of the day. Berk (2002) sees the hook or set as an instructional defibrillator. If the joke or action is represented by paddles, humor can bring the students back to life and shock them to attention.

I have used a question as a “hook” or “set” for discussion in developmental psychology class as we discuss gender differences in dating, friendships, and relationships. I show a short clip from the movie, *When Harry Met Sally* (Ephron, 1989), and ask students to discuss: Can men and women be friends? In the movie Harry implies that men and women cannot be friends because of the underlying sexual issues. It is usually a very lively discussion about men and women.

The use of humor has been an effective tool when discussing sensitive and high anxiety-producing subjects such as death and suicide (Johnson, 1990). Some college

courses are considered “dread” courses and are associated with negative attitudes and stress. These courses include statistics, math, and public speaking. Humor may help to reduce anxiety and improved performance in these courses (Berk & Nanda, 1998).

According to Korobkin, (1989), humor can diminish anxiety in these difficult courses and can change the tone of the instructional process.

Professors may consider the importance of using humor in their own lives and not just in the classroom. Provine (2000) outlines five suggestions:

- 1) Increase interpersonal contact through eye-to-eye and face-to-face contact.
- 2) Create a casual (and safe) atmosphere.
- 3) Adopt a laugh-ready attitude.
- 4) Provide humorous materials
- 5) Remove social inhibitions.

As we see, humor is used in a variety of ways and for different purposes in the classroom and in our lives. I turn now to the impact of humor on classroom climate.

### College Classroom Climate

The third component of this chapter reviews the concern for creating a welcoming classroom climate. The benefits of using humor to improve classroom climate can be one of the most important considerations for a college professor. Creating a learning environment is often listed as the most important role for a teacher of adults (Robinson, 1999). The college classroom climate can be defined as the atmosphere created by the teacher, the way the teacher interacts with students, and the physical environment of the

room (Satheesh, 2009). A professor is charged with creating a positive social climate, setting high expectations for students, fostering high self esteem for individual students, and establishing an environment for students to achieve the academic goals set by the university or state (Shapiro, 1993). These challenges may seem overwhelming because instructors have little or no control in determining institutional student outcomes, class membership, and college resources. The emphasis is primarily on the students and how they attain the learning outcomes mandated by the institution.

Professors must do more than just motivate students to learn course content and persist to successfully earn a degree. Professors must pay attention to class dynamics. “The emotional climate of the classroom is directly related to the attainment of academic excellence, however defined. Students’ feelings about what they experience in class—whether inclusion or exclusion, mastery or inadequacy, support or hostility—cannot be divorced from what and how well they learn (Wilkinson & Ansell, 1992, p. 4). The professor-student connection is critical for learning (Astin, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Hillman (2001) proposes that four aspects should be considered in the area of education and humor. The first aspect is to enhance the learning process itself through humor. Second is using humor to help the process of socialization. The third element is teaching the concept of humor for a communication and intervention tool. Fourth is modeling the use of humor to facilitate the other three aspects.

Laughter and humor are universal aspects of human experience and are present in all cultures, but humor in the classroom has not been researched extensively until the past

two decades (Lefcourt, 2001). Reasons for the lack of study may have been that humor was not viewed as a “serious” topic. It may be difficult to have scientific experiments about humor and even the complexity of the topic may have prevented past research (Dixon, 1980). Most of the strong endorsements of humor are based on anecdotal evidence from teachers’ reports in the classroom (Martin, 2007). Unfortunately, some educators believe their positions or their disciplines are too serious to utilize humor in their classrooms (Gardner, 2006). Professors may have a general distrust of humor and play and feel laughter may be distracting to intellectual activities (Pollio, 2002).

A key question for classroom climate is why should we use humor as a teaching tool? Does the use of humor improve the classroom climate and make learning more enjoyable and effective? There are many ways the use of humor could affect the college classroom climate including: developing a better attitude toward the instructor and the course, improving class and faculty evaluations, reducing tension and stress, facilitating bonding of professor and students, establishing connections between classmates, developing a sense of community in the classroom, creating a more supportive learning environment, boosting self esteem for individual students and teachers, increasing actual learning, enhancing students’ attitudes toward the subject matter, and remembering more information over time.

One example of how humor improves classroom climate is how students seem to enjoy learning more and to feel positive about the course and the instructor. Wanzer and Frymier (1999) studied 314 students enrolled in one of two introductory courses in communication at a mid-sized Midwestern university. The students were asked to

complete the Humor Orientation scale first on themselves and then on the instructor they had immediately before their communication class. They also took the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale, an assertiveness-responsiveness measure, and two different assessment scales to gauge their level of learning. The researchers found that instructors with higher Humor Orientation scores had significant and more positive relationships with their students. There was also a relationship between the professor's socio-communicative style and immediacy with the students. The students reported they learned more from teachers with high Humor Orientation and socio-communicative scale scores. Wanzer and Frymier found that college students felt positively about the instructors' responsiveness to students and their analyses revealed that students believed they learned more from the professors who used in humor in their teaching.

Accordingly, a professor who uses humor may receive more positive student evaluations. Student surveys frequently rate having a sense of humor as one of the most desirable characteristics for college professors (Check, 1986; Powell & Andresen, 1985). Professors who are observed using more humor in the classroom are ranked more positively by their students (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillman, 1980). There was a strong correlation among teacher uses of humor in the classroom and student evaluations of professors (Civikly-Powell, 1999). The most-favored faculty were the professors ranked as "very humorous" or "somewhat humorous" by students and the least favored faculty were rated as "serious" (Seaton, Vogel, & Pell, 1980). It is not surprising that the use of humor can affect classroom climate. In one study over 80% of both faculty and students believe humor in college classes can help relieve stress, gain attention, and

create a healthy learning environment (White, 2001). A humor-enriched environment was also shown to increase attendance in class (Devadoss & Foltz, 1996). Humor in the classroom has also been found to reduce anxiety, boredom, enhance student-teacher relationships, make learning more positive and enjoyable, improve memory and comprehension, and promote creativity (Berk, 2003). Students may be more motivated to learn in a positive atmosphere (Oppliger, 2003). Hillman (2001) presents one of the most compelling reasons for using humor to create an atmosphere more conducive for learning. Creating classrooms with a sense of community or developing a feeling of belonging is essential for developing a constructive classroom climate. Humor was associated with teacher interactions that were helpful, cooperative, trusting, and friendly. Hillman believes humor can help set the tone for a class environment.

Humor can help to humanize, illustrate, defuse, encourage, reduce anxiety, and keep people thinking (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004). Wanzer and Frymier (1999) noted a positive relationship between humor orientations of professors and the reports of student learning. Students felt they learned more from teachers who utilized humor. Wanzer and Frymier recommended that teacher education programs incorporate a humor component.

The value of humor for classroom climate may be particularly helpful in making a connection between professors and students. Laughter can serve as an important social facilitation and bonding function in a classroom (Provine, 1992). Andersen (1979) stated the value of humor in the classroom is related to immediacy, the concept where the professor makes a connection with the students. Pollio and Humphreys (1996) found

establishing a connection between a professor and the student was essential in effective teaching. The use of appropriate humor could foster mutual respect and a positive learning environment (Kher, Molstad, & Donahue, 1999).

Other researchers have noticed the importance of humor in the classroom. Medgyes (2002) noted that nothing can glue people together better than shared moments of fun. Humor can bond students together with the teacher.

Classroom climate was one of the issues studied over the last few decades and one crucial factor in assisting students to be successful in higher education is to create an atmosphere of community (Biddle, Bank, & Slavings, 1990). Professors can promote a sense of belonging in classes. In 1996, Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall wrote a book called *The Chilly Classroom Climate: A Guide to Improve the Education of Women*, and they focused on how teacher behaviors may contribute to classroom atmosphere, but it also studied classroom structure, power dynamics and relationships between students as critical variables. The research found a number of gender inequities in classrooms, but their research cited a number of ways faculty members could improve the classroom atmosphere to benefit any of the “outsider” groups, to include race or ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and social class. The use of humor is one example of a teaching behavior that allows for inclusion into the “in” group within the classroom. When a teacher makes a connection with a student in a class through laughter or shared humor, this may signal acceptance to the other students. Supportive connections are important for student success, especially for any individuals facing obstacles in their lives. Finding



someone with whom you can laugh is important in an academic environment that can often seem so solemn and serious.

Another way classroom climate could also affect the sense of community in a group of students was explored in a personality class at a midwestern university. McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, and Schweitzer (2006) demonstrated that scores in six variables for community significantly predicted students' attitudes, perception of learning, and their actual performance on exams. The six variables were: connection, participation, safety, support, belonging, and empowerment. They note that one way to improve the sense of community was to use humor to develop support and a feeling of belonging.

Faculty and student interaction seems to play a significant role in how comfortable students feel in class. If students feel safe, respected, supported, and encouraged to learn, their success rates are higher (McGlynn, 2001). Robinson (1995) found some of the benefits of humor in the classroom included improvement of problem solving, putting the educators and students at ease, and the promotion of expression and exchange of ideas. Creating a supportive climate may allow students to feel more at ease, to be relaxed, and open for new ideas. Humor used effectively can engender loyalty, boost morale, alleviate stress, signal openness, sweeten criticism, and increase effective leadership (Pierson & Bredeson, 1993).

Does using humor help students learn and retain information better? Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) tested students for comprehension and retention and found mixed results. In tests of immediate recall, humor did not facilitate memory, but when retested six

weeks later, groups who learned with humor did much better than groups who learned without humor. Using humor can aid in retention of information if students develop cues or mnemonic devices. Schmidt (1994) examined memory in a series of experiments. Humorous material related to course content and used on a limited basis was remembered more accurately because it received increased attention and rehearsal. Humor can facilitate the retention of novel information (Cornett, 1986).

Ziv (1988) developed a teaching-with-humor approach with three steps: (1) the teacher presents the concept in a relatively straightforward way; (2) the concept is then illustrated with a pre-selected anecdote or cartoon; (3) and after the laughter goes away, the teacher then paraphrases the concept presented in steps (1) and (2).

Ziv (1988) investigated memory and learning in two experiments. Students in an introductory statistics class were randomly assigned to receive the same 14 week course from the same professor in either a humorous or non-humorous condition. At the end of the semester the students' grades were analyzed, and the students in the humorous class earned 10 percentage points higher than the other group.

In a second experiment Ziv (1988) utilized two classes of female students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a teachers' college. Ziv found significant differences between students who were taught with the humorous procedure compared to a group who were presented with the concept without the humor. Exam scores were 10 points higher for the students taught with humor. Ziv was careful to use only related humor and stressed this procedure should be used judiciously to improve student learning

and recall. He concluded that humor increased the actual learning taking place, as defined by better final exam scores.

On the negative side of humor, Singer and Singer (1979) suggested that humor may create a frivolous mood that was not conducive for real learning, laughter may disrupt students' rehearsal of material, and students may miss the next parts of the lecture because they are laughing.

However, there is additional research by Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) that advocates the positive effects of laughter and remembering content. They played four different video lectures to over 500 undergraduates. The first version of the tape utilized humor directly related to the six concepts that would later be tested, the second tape had humor unrelated to the same six concepts, the third version contained humor which related to only three of the concepts and unrelated to the other three concepts. The fourth tape was a non-humorous version and presented the six concepts. The four groups of students were also presented with five other items in a non-humorous manner. One multiple choice exam was given immediately after the lecture and a different multiple choice exam was given six weeks later. The results produced an interesting pattern. There was no difference among the four groups on all 11 items, but the students in the no humor group scored better on the non-humorous items. On the second test given six weeks later, the students showed no difference in recalling the five serious items but had significantly better recall for the six humorous concepts.

Weaver and Cottrell (1985) outlined a ten step "systematic sensitization sequence" that allows a professor to develop and use humor in the classroom to strengthen

classroom climate. It is designed to help instructors become more comfortable and motivated to try humor. The ten steps are: (1) smiling, (2) being spontaneous, (3) fostering an informal climate, (4) beginning class with a thought for the day, (5) using stories and experiences, (6) relating things to students, (7) planning lectures in segments with humor injected, (8) encouraging a give-and-take climate, (9) asking students for humorous material, and (10) telling a joke or two. These ideas foster a classroom climate that encourages humor.

Likewise, research by Darling and Civikly (1987) has shown that students in supportive classroom climates retain more information than students in defensive classrooms. They list the following characteristics of a supportive climate: sense of equality, sense of empathy for students, problem orientation, and descriptive grading. They recorded the following attributes of a defensive climate as: teacher superiority, neutral attitude towards students, control orientation, and evaluative grading. Students felt classes with no humor were orderly, and hostile classrooms seemed unfriendly and competitive. Students rated classrooms and teachers who used relevant humor as more interesting, supportive, and affirming.

According to Moos and Moos (1973), students attain greater achievement in learning and grades when students pay attention to and interact with each other. Positive professor attitudes and a classroom climate that encourages working together as a group and sharing common goals contribute to improved academic success. Humor can help students to work together.

There are some types of humor in the classroom that may be inappropriate or aggressive as well as a detriment to the educational climate and emotionally damaging to students. Bryant and Zillmann (1989) have observed that using humor successfully “depends on employing the right type of humor, under the proper conditions, at the right time and with properly motivated and receptive students” (p. 74). One study by Bryant and his colleagues involved the analysis of humor in tape recorded sessions of 70 college students which classified the instructors’ use of humor into six categories: joke, riddle, pun, funny story, humorous comment, and “other” (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillman, 1980). One area of significance in this study is how students evaluated the degree to which the humor was sexual, hostile, or nonsense in nature. Professors who used negative humor received lower evaluations from the students. Some teachers actually use hostile forms of humor with their students. By teasing or ridiculing students, professors may feel they are setting an example and serving as a behavioral deterrent, but this study showed that the results are negative.

Further research by Civikly-Powell (1999) stressed that professors should be very cautious when teasing students, even when the teasing is positive. According to her research, students were very uncomfortable with teacher sarcasm, even when the target of the sarcasm was the teacher. Humor can help students feel more comfortable in the classroom, but there is a difference in power between students and teachers, and it is important to understand this dynamic. Professors should avoid embarrassing students.

Another study about students and professors and their perception about humor was conducted in 2004 by Torok, McMorris, and Lin. Participants were professors and

students from different disciplines including biology, education, psychology, and theater. Three instructors from each department and 124 of their students in the six sections, two sections of each course were surveyed with almost 100 percent participation. The types of humor ordinarily used by the teachers were indicated by both the professors and students and the responses were very similar between them. The students were asked if the professor uses humor and 60 percent indicated always and when questioned if the professor was entertaining and witty, 70 percent strongly agreed. One of the potential limitations for using humor was for offensive humor, particularly sarcasm. Even though sarcasm was considered a negative form of humor, it was listed as the fifth most frequently used type of humor in this study. The researchers reported some students had seen sarcasm used effectively and constructively, but the authors warned against using any type of hostile humor.

Accordingly, college professors should realize that humor is based on individual and subjective interpretation. Veatch (1998) outlines offensive humor as any word, object, or action that could violate an individual's values, morals, or norms of behavior. Berk (2002) states: "Humor that can potentially offend any student is inappropriate in the classroom (p.13). He lists the following negative effects on a student: tightening up, withdrawal, resentment, anger, tension, anxiety, turning off, or tuning out. One of the goals of humor is to connect with students, and offensive humor can have a negative effect for the classroom climate and student-teacher bond.

Research has shown some gender differences in the use of humor in the classroom. Some early research found that students viewed female teachers who used humor more

negatively than male professors (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988). Students seemed to be more strongly influenced by the amount and kind of humor used by male teachers than by female instructors (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). In one study researchers used data from tape recorded classes and found that female teachers used humor 65 percent as often as male teachers, used less jokes than males (3 percent to 21 percent), less stories (26 percent to 42 percent), more brief humorous comments (33 percent to 13 percent) and more tendentious humor (62 percent to 43 percent) (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillman, 1980). Tendentious humor was described by Freud (1905) as the sexual or aggressive element in jokes that would release libidinal impulses. However, more recent research found that college students rated professors more positively on student evaluations when they used humor but male teachers were still rated somewhat higher than female instructors (Gorham and Christophel, 1990). In the Gorham and Christophel study, students listed incidents they perceived as humorous in 1030 sessions of classes in which they were enrolled. This study indicated that females' frequency of humor use was 86 percent of the male professors. The uses of stories, tendentious humor, jokes, and comments were more similar in number in the Gorham and Christophel study.

Humor research has found women laugh more than men in response to humor (Bogaers, 1993; Brodzinsky, Barnet, & Aiello, 1981; Cantor, 1976; Easton, 1994; Hay, 2001; Makri-Tsilipakou, 1994; Provine, 2000). Foot and Chapman (1976) found that men are more likely to create humor, and men tend to get more laughs as compared to women. Most stand-up comedians are men. Men usually like to tell formal jokes, and women rarely tell jokes; they usually tell stories or describe situations that are funny (Berk,

2002). Marketing executives have found that advertisements aimed at women are more successful if they are humorless (Barreca, 1991). There seems to be gender differences in what men and women find funny. Farhi (2000) analyzed ads directed to men and found men will laugh at almost anything including men who are embarrassed, talking frogs or lizards, bawdy humor, and even idiotic and insulting situations. Women do not laugh when individuals are embarrassed or hurt. Women students enjoy mildly amusing stories and even some sexual humor, but only when the male is the victim but not when there is a female victim of the humor. Female students do not like hostile or aggressive humor (Herzog, 1998; Herzog & Anderson, 2000; Herzog and Karafa, 1998).

Furthermore, in the literature about humor differences of males and females there is a suggestion that males use jokes and seem to appreciate humor more than females, and females engage in and appreciate self-deprecating humor to a greater degree than males Levine, (1976). Crawford and Gressley (1991) reported males were more likely to enjoy hostile humor and slapstick humor, and females engage in anecdotal humor about things that happened to themselves and their friends. The humor of the males was directed at others and the humor of females focused on themselves. Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (1998) addressed the differences between the sexes and felt that the demands of social situations more than humorous styles or personality characteristics could explain the variations. Men's humor tends to be more competitive and focused on self-enhancement. Women's humor is more likely to be supportive and concerned with sharing experiences. Lampert and Ervin-Tripp have hypothesized the differences may fade as the roles for women continue to change.



At the same time researchers are seeing one sign that men may be beginning to judge women as equals in humor. In 1975 researchers at Indiana University Northwest found both men and women rated a joke funnier when a woman was the butt of the joke. In 1996 they reported that male students were equally amused if a joke had a male or female target, and female coeds felt a joke was less funny when a woman was the butt of the joke (“A Guy Walks Into a Bar...”). There is some research that people enjoy put-downs more when they have a negative attitude toward the victim (Wicker, Barron, & Willis, 1980).

Another factor to consider in classroom climate is the personality of the professor. There is not just one personality type that allows teachers to be successful in the classroom (Eble, 1983). Excellent teachers use their unique talents to engage students in the learning process, and they may have to alter their own style to fit the specific teaching environment. Vargo (1997) states that master teachers should be approachable, genuine, and humorous. They respect their students and expect students to respect them, too (Beidler, 1997). Master teachers form rapport with their students very similar to therapists and clients, and this rapport facilitates approachability (Lowman, 1995). It is the professor who sets the tone for the environment in the classroom. Duffy and Jones (1995) describe the professor, content, and student as interactive and interdependent and all are shaped by their interactions. Brookfield (1990) refers to enthusiasm or passion as an important characteristic for an outstanding teacher and feels that demonstrating excitement about the subject matter and sharing that enthusiasm with students is significant. Master teachers convey an excitement and energy in their classrooms.

Lowman used factor analysis to determine two broad factors that separate ordinary teachers from the best ones. His results showed that students preferred professors who presented material both clearly and with enthusiasm. The second factor was that students liked instructors who are warm, understanding, and showed concern for students as individuals. Enthusiasm and laughter can be infectious (Loomans & Kolberg, 1993).

In a study about the behavior of master teachers conducted by Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, and Saville (2002), 916 undergraduate students in a large introductory psychology course and 118 faculty members were given a list of 28 qualities/behaviors of college professors. They were instructed to select “the 10 qualities/behaviors that are most important to master teaching at the college and university level.” Every student and faculty member cast 10 votes for what they thought was important. The results were analyzed for similarities and differences, and there were not any appreciable differences in the rankings: male and female students rated the items very similarly as did the male and female faculty members. The student participants rated items very similarly, and faculty members also had similar results with each other. Students and faculty agreed on 6 of the top 10 qualities, although the order differed between the two groups. The six qualities were: realistic expectations/fairness, knowledgeableness/ approach-able/personable, respectful, creative/interesting, and enthusiasm. The remaining 4 of the top 10 items showed a marked difference between students and professors. The faculty emphasized elements of classroom instruction (effective communication, prepared, current, and critical thinking), and the students favored the student-teacher relationship (understanding, happy/positive/humorous, encouraging, and flexible). The students

ranked happy/positive/humorous as the seventh most important characteristic, and faculty members ranked it as 27.

In another study, researchers surveyed 119 undergraduates and 85 percent were juniors and seniors, to discover what behaviors ideal teachers should do (Epting, Zinn, Buskist, & Buskist, 2004). The students were given a 40-item, multiple choice survey and asked to evaluate their professors in three categories: personal characteristics, course design and policy, and classroom behaviors. They were asked to distinguish between “typical professors” and “ideal professors.” Overall, the research suggested the ideal professors should be accessible to students, allow student input into course policies and procedures, present a significant variety of teaching methods in the course, and create a comfortable learning environment. On one test item they also reported 97 percent of the ideal instructors used humor often and only 75 percent of typical teachers utilized it occasionally.

Additional research about personality and a sense of humor was explored with a study of 133 undergraduate students. The junior level students were asked to identify and categorize their “best” and also their “worst” instructor by describing each professor in one sentence. Brown and Tomlin (1996) found that over one third of the sample selected listed “the instructor’s sense of humor and the class was enjoyable” and the “instructor’s variety of teaching methods” as the variables that most influenced their choice as their best professor. In the sentences 26 students mentioned “enthusiastic or motivating” in their responses for their best professor. Another high response (21) was given for instructors who “showed an interest in students’ success.” A sincere enthusiasm for what

we teach, a sense of humor, and an assortment of teaching methods influence student ratings of college professors. Erdle, Murray, and Rushton (1985) determined there was a relationship between a teacher's personality and teaching effectiveness. When students were asked if they felt positively about professors who use humor constructively, 73 percent of students strongly agreed and 59 percent felt humor promoted a sense of community (Torok, McMorris, & Lin 2004).

Norton and Nussbaum (1980) concluded that effective teachers were more dramatic than less effective professors. They also reported instructors who used self disclosure and narratives were perceived by students as more effective particularly when the narratives were presented dramatically, enhanced the significance of the course material, and reduced the psychological distance between the teacher and students. College professors tend to use humor as a reflection of their own personality traits.

Two investigations were conducted by Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum (1988) regarding the use of certain verbal behaviors by college professors. In the first study 57 college teachers, with their permission, were tape recorded by students three times during the semester. The tapes were coded to quantify their use of humor, self disclosures, and narratives. The second study involved comparing these codes with the tapes of nine award-winning professors. There were significant differences between the award-winning teachers and the "regular" teachers in the frequency of humor, narratives, and self disclosures. Both groups agreed with the "purpose" of the three verbal behaviors, but the outstanding professors used these methods much more often. A professor's style is important but their behaviors and technique also influence effectiveness.

In addition to the ways humor can affect classroom climate, there are a number of factors such as physical arrangements, atmosphere, class size, and eye contact that can sway an environment. One interesting phenomenon is how laughter is a natural, social, and almost infectious behavior. People will join in laughing when other people in a group are laughing, and it spreads almost contagiously in a group's environment similar to smiling, yawning, and fighting (Provine, 1992, 1996). The closer students can sit to each other, the greater the chances of laughter. Physical proximity increases laughter, and seeing other people laugh enhances the giggling (Aiello, Thompson, & Brodzinsky, 1983; Chapman, 1973, 1975). The size of the class can also affect humor. Laughter is 30 times more frequent in social situations as compared to solitary locations (Provine, 2000). In large groups laughter seems to spread and be more contagious (Aiello et al., 1983).

The atmosphere of the class created by the professor and students is important for how often people will laugh. If there is a playful, open, and relaxed mood in the setting, students will be more responsive to humor (Alden, Mukherjee, & Hoyer, 2000). Chapman (1973, 1975) confirmed that eye contact with children increased laughter, and more student-to-student eye contact during a shared experience generated more laughter with college students (Søbstad, 2001).

“Never smile before Thanksgiving,” was a warning that was routinely given to new teachers. This teaching philosophy was based on the idea if you were kind, nurturing, and fun in the classroom, your students would eat you alive. Hopefully, we can create an atmosphere where our students can thrive academically and a classroom climate that

makes teaching and learning more enjoyable. Using humor may allow us to “warm up” the classroom climate for professors and students.

### Summary of the Literature

Humor and laughter are important in our everyday lives. Although the research on humor in the college classroom has been quite limited, the existing research does suggest teachers and students can benefit from appropriate uses of humor (Martin, 2007).

This chapter begins with a discussion of physical and psychological benefits of humor. Physicians and psychologists have documented a number of ways laughter helps us including: facilitating self-healing, elevating levels of immunoglobulins, improving the immune system, increasing pain tolerance, lowering blood pressure, and burning calories. I also discussed how humor has important social and emotional elements. The chapter presented research literature about how humor can strengthen interpersonal relationships, increase productivity, reduce emotional stress, improve moods, raise self esteem, enhance memory, improve brain functioning, boost creativity, and encourage resilience. Humor touches on many areas of human behavior. For these reasons, humor benefits college professors physically and psychologically.

The second section discusses the literature about the ways college professors use humor in the classroom. There are two categories of humor: high risk and low risk (Berk, 2003). Humor can be explained by three theories of humor including the Incongruity, Superiority, and Relief theories (Hillman, 2001; James, 2001; Matthews and Hattam, 2004). Teachers appear to use humor in a variety of ways including the use of jokes, analogies, irony, games, cartoons, verbal gags, auditory humor, puns, props, narratives,

examples, personal experiences, videos, riddles, skits, humor on syllabi and exams, thoughts for the day, and questions, In addition this chapter also presented studies about how often professors used humor, the effectiveness of different types of humor, and how humor should be incorporated in all areas of our life (Berk, 2003; Bryant, Comisky, & Zillman, 1979; Ziv, 1976, 1983, 1988; Neuliep, 1991). Humor can be a powerful instructional tool, and college professors have utilized an assortment of methods to integrate humor into their classrooms.

The third section introduces information about the benefits of humor to create a positive classroom climate. Humor can improve climate by helping students to have a better experience in the classroom. If students are comfortable and encouraged to learn, they will have more success (McGlynn, 2001). Enhancing the environment of the classroom also benefits professors. Information about how the use of humor makes teaching more enjoyable for professors was presented in this chapter. Laughter can encourage a bond between students and faculty members. There are appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor in the classroom, and any form of humor that leads to individual or group discomfort should be avoided in the classroom setting (Huss, 2008).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

*Why did the teacher have crossed eyes? Because she couldn't control her pupils.*

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways college professors intentionally use humor in their classrooms, how they use humor to shape classroom climate, and why humor influences their experience of teaching. I view teaching as a dynamic activity that involves an individual's personality, intellect, and values. Because the purpose of this research is to examine the subjective phenomenon of individual professors, I have chosen qualitative research to try to understand their experiences.

Qualitative research has many characteristics that make this methodology appropriate for this study. The qualitative framework for this study is based on: 1) the meanings people have constructed, 2) how I, as the researcher and primary instrument, will collect and analyze the data, 3) interviewing and observing professors in their natural environments, 4) employing an emergent design of inductive research strategy that may lead to hypotheses or even theories, and 5) how the process will yield richly descriptive information.

Each of these five features of qualitative research will allow me to focus on the topic of humor in the classroom and discover information relevant to this study. The first characteristic relates to how humans make or acquire meaning (Schwandt, 2000).



According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research endeavors to understand meanings individuals have constructed; how they make sense of their worlds and their experiences. “Why” questions are best answered through qualitative research (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). Psathas (1973) proposed that meaning is an essential aspect of qualitative research and by asking people questions we discover “what they are experiencing, how they interpret their experiences and how they themselves structure the social world in which they live” (p. 37). The qualitative emphasis on understanding will be beneficial in clarifying the reasons why professors in this study use humor. The professors’ perspectives of student learning and teaching will be helpful in considering their methods and strategies.

In this qualitative study, I served as the primary instrument for gathering research data and making interpretations. Cole and Knowles (2001) outlined the importance of understanding yourself as a researcher and stated: “The way we research is a reflection of how we orient ourselves to the world—our epistemological and ontological assumptions” (p. 48). As a researcher I am interested in how the participants view their teaching. My own perspective influences how I capture and interpret their experiences. In their book, *Lives in Context*, Cole and Knowles asserted: “The values, beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and physical, social, and contextual characteristics that shape who we are, as well as the passions, commitments, and motivations that drive us, are all very much present when we assume and carry out our role as researcher” (2001, p. 49).

My interest in this topic is the result of 17 years of college teaching and the lens through which I view this topic is my own teaching experience. My teaching is a

reflection of my beliefs, experiences, and values. When I started teaching, I was interested in sharing the information I knew about psychology. Very quickly, I realized that students need to feel that I cared about them as people and not just as students. They wanted to know me and not just the knowledge I could teach them. As adult learners, they had experiences and ideas that they wanted to share. I also realized that they needed to feel a connection with other students in the class and not just a connection with me. I believe adult learners are very practical and want to know how theories and ideas affect their lives. I think humor could be one way to connect and get close to my students. I believe laughter is a way to help students feel more comfortable in class, more willing to share their ideas, and more eager to learn. I believe humor can help a student be more open to learning if they are not worried about their positions or relationships within the class. My teaching philosophy is based on the idea that learning can be educational and entertaining.

The next characteristic I considered was interviewing and observing professors in their natural environments. Patton (1990) declares the purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information. Interviewing can also be defined as a conversation—but a “conversation with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970).

Why use interviews? Traditionally researchers have used interviews because of the belief that a well-placed informant—the village chief or the town thief—could describe a town’s way of life with great accuracy and detail (Ochberg, 1994). Professors can share how they make sense of in their environments--their classrooms. In my interviews and

observations of college teachers I saw connections between their narratives and the forces that shaped their behavior.

“The model of a ‘facilitating’ interviewer who asks questions, and a vessel-like ‘respondent’ who gives answers is replaced by two active *participants* who jointly construct narrative and meaning” (Reissman & Quinney, 2005, p. 283). I tried to be an active interviewer and guide the conversations with the professors with sensitivity and empathy. I stressed to the participants the importance of their stories and the value of their experiences. Sometimes interviewing can be seen as an inequitable process with the researcher gaining information with little benefit for the participant, but if I demonstrate a sincere interest in their teaching and their stories, perhaps the teachers will feel the process has been more reciprocal (Seidman, 1998).

Another characteristic of qualitative research is that this study uses an emergent design that may lead to hypotheses or even theories and its approach is inductive. My own theoretical perspectives influence how I approach and analyze the data. I discovered and tried to understand a phenomenon about college professors and how and why they use humor in the classroom. Through interviews, observations, and understanding I gained information about this topic.

The last feature of qualitative research is that it will yield rich, descriptive information. By observing and interviewing undergraduate instructors, I was able to generate a great deal of information about their behavior, ideas, and beliefs. Qualitative research strives for “thick description” (Denzin, 2001). I recorded the details of the interviews and class observations. I made notes of the physical setting, personal

appearance, individual mannerisms, particular events, specific activities, and unique behaviors of the professors I studied. After I put together the field notes, I reflected on my personal account of the interview and recorded my feelings and impressions. These notes were not interpretations, but another means to improve my understanding of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The study is comprised of my descriptions of the participants' experiences and the essence of those experiences. The narratives describe their reactions and feelings about the use of humor in their teaching.

### Sample

The participants were ten undergraduate college professors presently teaching classes at two or four year colleges and universities. I wanted to interview professors who had at least three years of experience teaching at the college level. I selected at least three years of experience as a requirement because psychological theories of performance acquisition, using common sense and empirical data, often specifies five levels or stages of development appropriate to learning to teach (Berliner, 1994). Stage 1 is called the Novice Level, and first year teachers are gaining experience and often demonstrate basic skills. The next stage is called Advanced Beginner Level, and second and third year teachers are likely to be in this stage and often develop strategic knowledge about how to ignore or break rules and when to follow them. Stage 3 is called Competent Level, and many third and fourth year teachers are performing at this level and may feel more responsibility for what happens in the classroom than novices or beginners. Proficient Level is stage 4 and a modest number of teachers move into this stage of development about the fifth year and teaching "know-how" becomes evident. Expert is the final stage,

and these professors show fluid performance with insightful and seemingly effortless teaching behavior and very few teachers reach this level. I have selected three years of experience because the Competent level instructor makes better instructional decisions, and they seem to have better memories of their successes and failures than the novice or beginner (Berliner, 1994). All ten professors selected have taught at least five years at the college level.

I chose the ten professors purposefully to obtain rich information. My dissertation committee suggested I contact the Centers for Teaching Excellence at local universities and colleges by phone or email and ask for recommendations of professors who intentionally use humor and who may be recognized as excellent instructors. I also contacted colleagues at colleges and universities and asked them to recommend other colleagues who intentionally use humor in their classrooms. I have worked as a counselor at two colleges and have taught at four different educational institutions, so I have contacts at several schools. Snowball or chain sampling was used by asking selected participants to recommend other professors who meet the criteria of this study. Snowball sampling is a common form of purposeful sampling, and this method occurs when a participant in a study refers the researcher to another possible participant (Merriam, 2009).

I did not ask the age of the professor because it did not seem pertinent. Their teaching tenures in college teaching range from 5 years to 30 years which they volunteered to tell me. They all have Master's degrees in their fields, three have earned

Ph.D.'s, and two are enrolled in doctorate programs. I did not ask detailed biographies of the participants, and I wish to preserve confidentiality as much as I can. I did not attempt to achieve ethnic or cultural diversity.

I contacted ten Centers for Teaching Excellence, and seven directors or center administrators generated names of possible participants for me to contact. After receiving a recommendation from a director of a Center for Teaching Excellence or a colleague, I screened the possible participants by asking a few questions by phone. I briefly explained my research topic and asked them: (1) Do you intentionally use humor in your classroom? (2) Do you use a variety of techniques in your teaching? (3) Can you describe one way you have intentionally used humor in your classroom? (4) Can you think of one specific story or incident that occurred when you used humor? These questions helped me determine if a professor would be a strong candidate to interview. I spoke with 22 participants, and ten were selected. The telephone script describing the research and determining the participants' interest in the study is included in Appendix A.

The participants were selected from a variety of six different disciplines and included six male and four female professors from seven different colleges or universities in midwestern United States. The different academic disciplines represented were: four from psychology, two from speech/communication, one from nursing, one from engineering/physics, one from philosophy, and one from sociology. I teach psychology, so I know more psychology professors. Seven professors teach at colleges with 8-10,000 students enrolled, one teaches at a college with over 40,000 students enrolled, one

professor teaches at a college with 6-8,000 enrolled, and one teaches at a college with 2-3,000 enrolled.

Throughout this study I have changed the names and initials of all participants, places, and people mentioned, in order to maintain confidentiality and privacy. College professors interviewed teach undergraduates in regular or “live” classrooms instead of online courses and with class sizes of less than 100. Social psychologists Thomas and Fink (1963) report classroom groups have two types of input which will increase with larger classes. One type of input increase is resource input which includes skills and knowledge and demand input which involves the needs of the students. The larger the number of students in a class, the greater the likelihood that members will have great resources of knowledge and intelligence, but in a large group a smaller number of students can participate orally, and a student may feel less likely to volunteer or contribute. The larger class will also have more needs to address. An instructor may feel constrained to lecture more, and it might be more difficult to use a variety of techniques to demonstrate humor in a large class. Only one of the professors I interviewed had large classes on a regular basis. She also taught classes with smaller numbers. Online teaching also demands special methods to incorporate humor and in this study I researched “live” courses. I taught online classes for three years, and I recognize the process of teaching is different for online courses. Text is the medium of interaction. Teaching online is more than posting lectures and integrating humor involves careful planning. Online humor must be very relevant and linked to the content of the course just as it should be in face to face classes. However, online humor loses the delivery, timing, and set-up for a joke or

cartoon. Students cannot see facial expressions, gestures, or body language. They cannot hear voice modulation, intonation, or funny sounds. Interaction between teacher and student and student to student is different online, so our teaching practice must be different to utilize humor. This study focused on face- to-face teaching.

The participants must be able to reflect upon their teaching practices and be aware of their teaching personalities and perspectives. How do we know who is a good teacher? How do we know if we have accomplished what we wanted to accomplish on a good day of teaching? “Reflection means thinking about what one is doing” (Jay, 2003, p. 1). Good teachers spend time reflecting on their work and reflecting on their teaching. There seems to be a consensus in the research literature: the most important influence on student learning is quality teaching (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999). The role of the teacher is to design experiences that help improve the learners’ abilities to perceive, feel, wonder, sense, create, fantasize, imagine, and experience (McEwen & Willis, 2007). Reflection seems to be essential to teacher learning and effective teaching (Hawley & Valli, 1999).

Selecting the participants was an interesting process. I called ten Centers for Teaching Excellence and either spoke to the director or left a message. After one week, I emailed the centers that had not returned my messages. Seven of the centers were able to suggest professors to me. An interesting occurrence was that each of the seven directors all suggested men at first for my study. When I pressed them for female participants, each of the directors had to give additional thought for a woman candidate. One center director sent out an email to the four deans at her college. Two of the deans responded with two males names each. Three of the center directors asked if they could call or email me



names after they had time to consider the needs of my study. I did not express any preference for males or females in my initial contact, but when they would give me only male names, I would request a female professor who used humor intentionally in the classroom and who was an excellent instructor. After interviewing each of the selected participants, I would ask if they knew any other professors I should interview. Nine of the ten selected participants each suggested men at first. When I pressed for female college professors, six of the participants gave me names or emailed me with possible teachers.

Availability was an issue for selection of some of the participants. I conducted the interviews in the summer, and some professors were out of town and unable to be interviewed. Six professors I talked with by phone or email told me they were unsuitable for this study, because they do not deliberately plan humor in their classrooms. Three professors told me they would be unavailable for an interview because of vacations or other plans. I was unprepared for the difficulty of selecting women professors, although before I did my research I had developed a list of four possible professors to interview, and they were all men. I only interviewed two of the four men on my “short list,” because I did not want to have too many professors from one college. I am not sure why I considered the four male college professors at first and did not have any women on my tentative list of prospective participants.

To protect their anonymity, I used famous teachers’ names from television programs, movies, and one well known teacher from history. The pseudonyms I am using will be: Professor Peter Plum from *Clue*, the movie and game, Professor Charles Kingsfield from *The Paper Chase*, movie and TV program, Professor Roy Hinkley from *Gilligan’s*

*Island*, Mr. Gabe Kotter from the television show *Welcome Back, Kotter*, Professor Indiana Jones from the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* movie, and Professor Dick Solomon from the television program *Third Rock from the Sun*. The female pseudonyms I used were: Anne Sullivan Macy, Helen Keller's famous teacher, Minerva McGonagall one of the professors in the Harry Potter books and movies, Edna Krabappel from *The Simpsons* television show, and Professor Mary Albright from the *Third Rock from the Sun* situation comedy show.

Here is a listing of the professors and their teaching fields:

<u>Professor</u>	<u>Teaching Field</u>
Mary Albright	Psychology
Roy Hinkley	Physics/Engineering
Indiana Jones	Sociology
Charles Kingsfield	Speech/Communication
Gabe Kotter	Psychology
Edna Krabappel	Psychology
Minerva McGonagall	Speech/Communication
Anne Sullivan Macy	Nursing
Peter Plum	Philosophy
Dick Solomon	Psychology

## Data Collection

### *Interviews*

The primary method for collecting data was through in-depth interviews with each professor. I interviewed instructors about their experiences and how and why they plan humor into their daily instructional plans. Face to face interviewing was used to allow me to enter into another person's perspective and gather his/her stories (Patton, 1990). I conducted semi-structured interviews for the interview schedule. Qualitative research strives for "thick description" (Denzin, 2001). I tape recorded the details of the interviews. I made notes of the physical setting, personal appearance, individual mannerisms, particular events, specific activities, and unique behaviors of the professors interviewed. After I put together the field notes, I reflected on my personal account of the interview and recorded my feelings and impressions. These notes were not interpretations, but another means to improve my understanding of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The study is comprised of my descriptions of the participants' experiences and the essence of those experiences. The narratives describe their reactions and feelings about the use of humor in their teaching. As is true of all qualitative research, this dissertation is a collaborative effort between the researcher and the participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The semi-structured interview questions are listed in Appendix B. I focused on the various ways the participants used humor. I inquired about their perceptions of the benefits of intentional humor and how it shapes the classroom climate. The semi-structured interview questions had open-ended questions. I asked questions that would

elicit stories of the informant's use of humor. I requested examples and accounts of their experiences. The interviews each lasted approximately one and a half to two hours. I tape recorded the interviews, took notes, and also transcribed them.

### *Observations*

I conducted classroom observations with the permission of four selected informants. The purpose of the observations was to provide a greater depth of understanding of the findings. Watching a participant use humor in the classroom could be helpful to understand the relationship of the professor with his/her students. The observations could also allow me to examine the ways a professor focuses on humor during a class session. The observations were not recorded, but I did take notes. I did not become involved in the classroom interactions. The observations enabled me to see how the professor actually used humor in their teaching and how the students responded. The observation was followed by a brief follow-up interview in which I asked the instructor to reflect on how and why they used humor at different points during that class session. The observations served as a research tool, too. During the classroom observations, I guided my practice by: "learning how to write descriptively; practicing the disciplined recording of field notes; knowing how to separate details from trivia..." (Patton, 1990, p. 201).

One of the limitations of the study involved the difficulty in scheduling the observations. I conducted one in the summer and three during fall classes. One of the professors I interviewed was recently promoted to a dean position at another college, and one of the professors I interviewed is on sabbatical leave, and I would be unable to

observe his teaching this fall. One professor told me he would rather not be observed, and I had schedule conflicts with the other participant. Two professors teach speech classes and except for a few classes, they have students making presentations, and they felt this would not be appropriate for my observation. Additional observations may have been helpful for this study, but I did obtain a great deal of information from the interviews and the four observations I conducted.

### Data Analysis

I began to analyze the data as I transcribed the interviews. By personally transcribing the tapes, I could attend to the nuances of the speakers, and it helped me to remember specific body language and tone of voice used during the interviews.

I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2009). In this method, I compared segments of data in one interview with another participant's interview and looked for similarities and differences. Grouping similar bits of information together, I gave the information a tentative name or category. I looked for patterns in the data. I read the interviews, made notes, compared the information, and then developed categories (Merriam, 2009). The categories are conceptual elements that bridge the many elements of a grouping (Glaser & Strauss). Collection and analysis of data is a simultaneous process (Hallberg, 2006). I entered the transcripts into Atlas.ti and coded them with that software program. I also reviewed my field notes and observations and clustered the categories and began to develop my findings.

Merriam (2009) noted there are several ways to enhance the internal validity of qualitative research, including member checks and peer examination. To that end, I emailed the dissertation findings to four of the participants for their feedback. I selected the four participants because of their knowledge of qualitative research. I asked them to review the data and conclusions I made. They made no comments about the findings I sent to them. I also invited two of my colleagues to examine and comment on my findings. The peer reviews helped to confirm the emerging research information and enhance validity to see if they agreed with the findings and interpretations.

I believe narratives are a way to construct identity, and the stories we tell others about ourselves and our experiences help to shape our view of our lives. When we do qualitative research, we must be aware of our own positions and beliefs. As I served as the primary data gathering instrument, I must understand my own prejudices and interpretations. I focused on the stories the participants shared with me so that I could understand their experiences. Humans are story-tellers, and we understand ourselves and our experiences by telling stories. Stories express our sense of self and help describe who we are and how we got that way (Linde, 1993). Narrative analysis may be described as the analysis of a story in terms of the structure as well as content.

It is through narratives that people organize, make sense of, and construct their reality (Riessman, 2008). The narratives themselves are shaped about how we feel when we tell them, who we are telling them to, and our listener's response (Linde, 1993).

Walter Fisher (1984) views storytelling as the most basic and universal of human activities and feels that it is central to human understanding, action, and interaction. One

way individuals make sense of their experience is by describing it in narrative form (Bruner, 1990; Gee, 1985; Mishler, 1986). Bruner (1990) argued, “One of the most ubiquitous and powerful discourse forms in human communication is narrative” (p. 77).

As a teacher myself, I feel I had an advantage in the interviews. I believe I was viewed as an insider, and this allowed me to be sensitive to their stories and struggles.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

*Question: What is the math teacher's favorite dessert? Answer: Pi!*

In this chapter, the major findings of this study are presented and demonstrate how ten college professors use humor and how it influences their teaching. First, humor, for them, is a constitutive part of their identity as teachers. Seven of the ten professors view themselves as “funny” people; they enjoy using humor in the classroom and in their daily lives. One teacher told me he was an introvert outside the classroom and an extrovert inside the classroom. Three of the teachers described themselves as introverts, as more quiet and shy. Their personalities were not out-going and dramatic. I observed four of the professors in the classroom. Two of the professors are colleagues of mine, and I have served on committees with them. They both described themselves as introverts. They are soft-spoken, and reserved outside the classroom. I was surprised at how they seem to “turn on” when they are teaching. Both of them were very dramatic and talkative when they were in front of a group of students. I knew that both of them had strong senses of humor, because I have observed them joking with friends and co-workers, but they were staggeringly different in their teaching style from their non-teaching selves. Two of the other professors I observed described themselves as comedians. I knew one of the professors before our interviews, attended a party in her home, and heard her make a presentation at a conference. She is dramatic in and outside the classroom. She stated in



our interview she was a comedian. She often tells jokes and was the life of the party I attended, literally. The other professor I observed for this study I knew only by a presentation he made at a conference. He described himself as almost a stand-up comedian, and in the classroom he does display many of the characteristics of a professional comic. He speaks rapidly, tells jokes, singles out students for personal comments, talks very loudly, and laughs a great deal at his own comments. During our interview he seemed to be very out-going and brassy. Despite these differences, all of the professors believe in the importance of humor in their classrooms. The professors in this study were very different in their personalities and in their uses of humor. I believe a sense of humor as a personality characteristic is essential for good teachers. Six of the professors felt they had early success in their teaching fields, and four of the teachers felt they became better teachers over a period of time. Three of the teachers stated the use of humor had given them confidence to try more active learning activities. The professors articulated the belief that their sense of humor and the ways they used humor in the classroom made them better teachers. The use of humor contributed to their growth as outstanding professors and the development of their teaching identities. Their teaching identities were created as they learned from their own teaching mentors, developed their personal teaching philosophies, and became confident enough to show their own personalities in their classrooms. The teaching techniques they use in their classrooms reflect their creative individuality. Their uses of humor were very unique and imaginative. The professors believe humor is essential to their teaching.

The second finding was that these professors have constructed very student-centered, positive classroom climates. All of them recognized the benefits of humor for their students and were aware of the advantages of humor for the learning process and to foster bonds between students and teacher. They also said humor made their jobs as teachers more satisfying. They were also cognizant of appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor and were careful in exactly how they used humor in their teaching.

The final finding refers to how these professors are viewed as a performer. These professors have constructed teaching identities that allow them to go into the classroom and present information often in a dramatic, striking manner. The teachers in this study have developed teaching methods that capture the students' attention, and the techniques often reflect theatrical styles or approaches that make them feel like performers.

I conclude this chapter with a discussion of one professor who constituted a discrepant case. He differed in significant respects from the other professors in this study, particularly in his insensitive and often inappropriate use of humor in the classroom.

### Humor and Teaching Identity

The ten professors I interviewed are excellent professors and have been recognized as outstanding educators through awards and by their referral to me by the directors of Centers for Teaching Excellence or their fellow professors. They have earned the respect of their students and peers. They have developed strong teaching identities. A primary finding of this study is that humor has helped these professors to develop their teaching

identities. They understand their own personal strengths and weaknesses as instructors and as individuals. They have learned who they are and have developed skills to be effective professors by shaping their teaching selves to reflect their individual personalities.

Some of the factors that influenced the professors' teaching identities in this study were: how humor was essential to their teaching, how humor is very individual, and how humor must fit their personalities. Other issues discussed in this section are the ways humor affected the professors' teaching identities in their early teaching experiences and choice of careers. The participants also stated their teaching mentors also shaped their teaching selves.

A recurring theme I heard throughout the interviews of the professors in this study was how humor was an intrinsic part of their teaching identity. A good example of this is provided by Nursing Professor Anne Sullivan Macy when I asked her about her philosophy of teaching and how humor fit into it:

Anne: I think that humor is just an innate part of human beings, of who we are; the person who can find humor even in the darkest moments. At some point of time or other, all of us are going to have situations or things we're in and, yes, there is a time to cry, sob, or be really sad, but then the humor is just as healing as tears are. So if humor is just innate to who we are as human beings, I would not be able to separate the humor from (who I am). And I have a real serious side, too, that students see, and both sides work. If all they ever saw was that serious side I would just be uni-dimensional. It just wouldn't work. Because part of finding that humor, also allows you to look for the joy.

Professor Gabe Kotter teaches psychology and felt he had grown into his teaching identity when I asked him about his early teaching and his use of humor.

Gabe: I think when I started I was pretty strait laced and very much lecture, very academic, very much by the book driven. Now the difference is now I let my personality, I let myself go and unrestricted, so to speak, and show who I am as a person.

Developing a teaching identity is a complex and evolving process and more than one of the professors shared how using humor helped them to gain confidence in the classroom to be their real selves. Speech Professor Minerva McGonagall said:

Minerva: Well, I think based on your interview with me you probably already know this, that people who use humor actively, daily in class are fairly ego driven. I mean it is a reality I understand and accept about myself to a certain extent.

K: Yeah! Some people have told me that they started out unconfidently about their use of humor in the classroom. Accidental? You think?

Minerva: Mine was accidental. I think it is a part of my personality but my use of it in the classroom was accidental. I did not set out to be funny. In the way I explain things, I think, was occasionally funny in those early years and it was very gratifying. I was like: this is kind of nice, for me, I can do more!

K: Ego?

Minerva: I don't think I ever intended to do it. I think my classrooms are very close to a reflection of who I am. So when I am criticized, I take it personally. Who I am in the classroom is kind of who I am.

Another component of identity that surfaced during my interviews was how important humor was to their teaching. All of the professors felt humor was essential to their teaching. I thought it would be an important method used for their teaching, but all of them insisted that humor was a very important ingredient in their teaching style. When I asked them: "What if I told you that you could not use humor as a teaching tool—how would that change how you approach teaching? How would it impact the satisfaction you derive from teaching?" Five of the professors stated that they could not teach without

humor; it would be impossible. Some of the instructors said they could teach, but they would not enjoy it because humor is a part of their teaching style and identity. A few of the professors would try to sneak the humor into their presentations. Their responses were:

“I would go underground and do it anyway!”

“I would use sign language.”

“I would find a way to circumvent it. I would say ‘I am not using humor, but they are laughing anyway.’ It would be a philosophical debate!”

“I would picket. It is essential to my teaching. I am not going to dress up, but I need humor.”

“I don’t think I could teach without it. It would leak out, perhaps in sarcasm.”

All of the professors voiced strongly how important humor was to their teaching. It was at this point I realized that using humor was not just a technique for them, but humor was a basic part of their personalities. They do not just use humor, they live humor. Their lives are filled with humor inside and outside of the classroom.

Professor Charles Kingsfield, who teaches Speech, made this statement about the possibility of teaching without using humor:

Charles: I could, but you know, I mean there would not be as much interest in it for me. In the same way I want my students when they are giving speeches to display their personality, I can’t see myself doing a real unique job if I can’t express my own personality in doing it. So that’s what I try to encourage my students to do and that’s what they see me do as I am teaching. If they see me anywhere else, they are all going to get my humor.

It is difficult to construct a teaching identity when you have not planned to become a teacher. I was surprised so many of the participants did not want to be teachers when they were growing up. Anne Sullivan Macy was a history major, Mary Albright planned to be a research scientist, Minerva McGongall was going to Hollywood to be an actress, and Charles Kingsfield was going to be a lawyer. During their college years or in graduate school they had been encouraged to consider teaching. Four of the participants worked in business, industry, nursing, or social service before entering academia.

One concern that was voiced by the participants who had not planned to be teachers was their lack of teaching skills or methods. Most colleges and universities assume if you are knowledgeable about a field, you have the abilities to teach the discipline. The professors who struggled at first with teaching were buoyed by their personalities and a strong sense of humor. Mary Albright, who teaches Psychology, related this story when I asked her if she always wanted to be a teacher:

Mary: No. Absolutely not. I did not think I wanted to be a teacher at all. I got into the business for research. Yes, I was gung ho to be a research scientist, but in graduate school one of my assignments near the end was to teach. Yes, I was a TA, but a few weeks before school started in the fall I got a notice that I was going to be teaching a sensation and perception class. Yes. No prep time or nothing. That was the assistantship, so you have to do it. And so I was team teaching that time and we did our best. I was not terribly enthused because I did not have any teaching training, that I really knew. It had not been that long when I was an undergrad so, I just tried to put myself in their shoes and explain the things that I thought were the most difficult and this kind of thing.

K: That's a hard one, too. That is a tough class.

Mary: It is a very tough class but it is my sort of specialty. I was excited that if I had to teach, I got to teach that one. Well, then after I got my Ph.D. and came back here, after I did my post docs and came

back here, they gave me Intro. Psych. which I had never taught before and these big freshman classes and lots of non-majors. Lots of non-majors, very few even majors. And so, at that point, having gone through my graduate career and post docs and I had a lot of experience at least managing undergrads and so I feel like I had a better insight into what they needed, in the beginning, was that these freshmen were terrified, they had never been in a classroom anywhere near this size, my very first time to teach intro I had over 300 students in the classroom. It's a lot. I noticed that they just looked terrified and they didn't ask questions, they didn't want to come to office hours, they were intimidated. It was a very, just unfulfilling feeling to have them. I didn't feel engaged.

When I first met Professor Mary Albright, she was warm and very friendly. She had welcomed me to her office, and we had chatted about the topic of my dissertation. As she described her early teaching experiences, she slowly shrank back in her chair and slumped. Even the memory of her early teaching seemed to weigh on her body. She wanted to be an effective, engaging professor and thinking about teaching her first classes made her sad. As the interview progressed, she returned to the petite, pretty fast-talking professor who had received me so cordially.

Psychology Professor Dick Solomon told me he wanted to be a college teacher but he had to change his plans. He told me:

Dick: Well, I had planned to become a high school biology and chemistry teacher, but there were no jobs in 1972 when I was working on my dissertation. I was taking my student-teaching classes and also teaching the teaching assistants at State University how to teach their college classes at the same time. So, actually I planned pretty poorly and did not end up with a teaching degree. I decided to finish my Ph.D. and then get a job, and that's when the job at South Community College came open. At first I did not do too well, but I think I got better.

On the other hand, Professor Edna Krabappel told me she always wanted to be a teacher, and she teaches psychology at her college! She began teaching in her home town

and seemed to have a bad experience at first. I asked her: How were your early teaching experiences?

Edna: Horrible. My experiences were horrible. Back then I was NOT well prepared. I student-taught with an older teacher who would walk over to these file cabinets and say, "Well, tomorrow we are going to study this topic," and pull out these great lesson plans and curriculum and two or three worksheets and handouts and he had just all these file cabinets filled with this great stuff.

K: Wow. That sounds great for him!

Edna: Yeah, but when I walked into my classroom, and the classes were huge, too, I did not have anything. No lesson plans, they gave me a book, and I had to teach 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> grade English, and these two other classes and that is four preparations. Four preps! And I was making \$382 a month. I had to take a part-time job sometimes on the week-ends just to pay the bills, and before that I had a job that paid like \$450 a month, and then I had graduate school, too. It was totally unrealistic for a new teacher. I stayed up late and would be reading a story or the lesson, you know, right before the students.

K: Just staying ahead of them?

Edna: Yes, just barely ahead of them! Developing curriculum is not my strong point. Well, as I said it was a little ol' country school, and I was a public school teacher. It was an old building, and it was long with the kindergarten in one end and the seniors at the other end. And it was an old building. I mean I had to do discipline and hall duty and monitor the lunch room and do all these little duties that have nothing to do with teaching, and it sent me right back to graduate school. I was driving 65 miles one way to go to graduate school one night a week. Then I became a high school counselor and that was a lot better, and then I was a counselor at West Community College and taught interpersonal communication as an adjunct, and then I went back to work on developmental issues, because that was the big issue then.

Some teachers seem to stumble upon teaching and have early success. One of the professors I interviewed told a story about why he became a professor. Sociology



Professor Indiana Jones told me when I asked him: “Did you always want to be a teacher?”

Indiana: No, I did not. Let’s see. I was working on my bachelor’s degree and I was taking, one of the classes I was taking was introduction to philosophy class or some philosophy class and part of the assignment, one of the major assignments in the class, I think about 30-40% of the grade, was that we had to select a philosopher, there were three of us in the group, and basically teach for about an hour. Which was mortifying and anyway, to make a long story longer,

K: (laughing).

Indiana: I did my part and got all ready, and I thought the other two people did as well and we had split everything up and our philosopher was Hegel, who is not an easy philosopher to do. There are a couple of crazy ones, and Hegel is one of them. But I thought: cool challenge, it won’t be as boring. Anyway what happened is one person wasn’t prepared at all, had nothing ready and then the other person, I did my part for about 20 minutes and then this person did her part for about seven minutes or eight minutes and then we were just looking at each other and somebody had to do something, so I got up and went for like another 20 minutes about Hegel. I was terrified. Remember I was just a lowly student. I didn’t know what the hell I’m doing, so I am at the board drawing diagrams, and explaining this and I could see people start getting it and saying, “Yeah,” and nodding. I realized: this is kind of fun. I like this. So, that’s where I came from. I was terrified.

K: That’s a great story.

Indiana: Yeah, so out of an hour we didn’t do a whole hour but we did about 55 minutes and I did like 48 of them. All by myself.

Later Indiana Jones told me he had early success in his teaching. The students not only liked him, but they protected him from threatening students.

Indiana: When I first starting teaching, I was teaching at an alternative school. It was a feeder for a large, inner city high school, actually Grant High school. Then they added a few more high schools, so it was actually in the southwest part of town. So there were a lot of gangs, drug users, pregnant kids, so that’s where we got a lot of the kids from. So that’s kind of how I started. I liked it. I did a pretty good job. I got voted

“King of the Teachers” by the students and was the chair for quite a while.

K: Wow! What did you teach?

Indiana: I taught a bunch of different things. I taught health, then I taught, what else? I taught general science which is now integrated science and physics and chemistry, biology, sociology and psychology.

K: Wow.

Indiana: And in the summers I taught economics and government.

K: Economics? And the challenges? Was it rough? Those are tough kids.

Indiana: Yeah. I’ve had people tell me they were going to shoot me before, but then, this is kind of funny, another student would stand up and say: “You better leave Mr. Jones alone!”

One reason Professor Indiana Jones was able to survive a stressful teaching situation is because he was able to see humor in a demanding situation. The search for teaching identity ran through many of the interviews. A clear vision of their own beliefs about teaching and an understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses as a teacher allow the outstanding professors I interviewed to excel in the classroom. Some of them acknowledged struggling in their early teaching. Sometimes the use of humor allowed them to try new strategies or stretch as a teacher. Sometimes their sense of humor helped them cope with their nervousness. Professor Dick Solomon, a Psychology teacher, shared with me:

My earliest challenge was shyness. I know it is hard to believe now, (laughs) but I was really shy. I was hesitant to get up in front of the class, not because of the material, but I was just shy about teaching. I overcame my shyness by practice. My wife, Carol, can tell you that I practiced and practiced. She is a teacher, too, as you know, and I practiced how I was going to teach and what I was

going to say. I can remember Dr. Carryone using voices and facial expressions, and so I practiced voices and making faces, too. I also had a fear of failing. I was really fearful of not doing well.

This professor is an excellent teacher. Before his observation he asked me if he should plan something funny in his lecture. I told him I was hoping for just one technique showing the use of intentional humor. I sat in on a 7:30 am general psychology class in the summer. During the one hour I watched him teach I was amazed, because he used so many humorous methods. He began by showing a funny video from an insurance company, and then a Coke commercial relating to the topic of the day. He frequently called the students by name and would tie in personal details about them. He might say, “Just like your three-year-old son, Susan!” Professor Solomon used self deprecating humor about his age, and all of the students laughed and nodded at him. At one point he was discussing love and satisfaction, and he said he was like that country western song, and the entire class began singing: “Looking for love in all the wrong places, looking...” and they continued to sing several lines of the song. Later in the lecture one student related that love was motivated by people wanting attention and love. She began singing: “I want it, I love it, I want some more of it,” and they sang again!

Professor Solomon moved around the classroom, engaging the students. He often used dramatic voices. He would ask with a high female voice: “Are women happier than men?” Once he used an announcer voice to ask: “What are the predictors of happiness?” to begin a classroom discussion. He also employed attention-getting power point slides. He had pictures of the seven dwarfs to show different personalities. He compared the id to a combination of Beavis and Butthead. His smile was contagious.

During an introduction to Sigmund Freud, he told several humorous stories about Freud's family and explained the historical context to his theories. He bantered with the students with spontaneous quips. Once he was discussing a baby, and he made a baby face and scrunched up his face and made wide eyes to illustrate a baby having a bowel movement. He even referred to a humorous website for additional information for the students. Every student in the class was engaged and taking notes. Every student, except one, in a class of 21 students made a comment or asked a question in the one hour I observed Professor Solomon. He seemed to be "on" and working the audience.

One interesting situation occurred during the observation. He had warned me about a particular student before my visit. This woman is a member of Raccoon Rescue and on the first day of class had asked Professor Solomon if she could bring a baby raccoon to class. The infant raccoon had to be fed every two hours, and the student had committed to its care before the class had started. He agreed, and the student brought the baby raccoon to class every day. I noticed a nylon bag moving on the table, but none of the students seemed concerned. After the class was over, the student brought out the small creature and he promptly urinated all over the table. She asked if I wanted to hold him while she cleaned up the area. The other students held the raccoon, and I could see that all of the students enjoyed him. Professor Solomon chatted with me and the other students and then rushed off to another class. Allowing a raccoon in your classroom every day proves to me that this professor has a playful spirit.

All of the professors in this study were inspired to teach by former teachers. These mentors encouraged, challenged, and served as role models for my study participants.

Every professor mentioned how their role models used humor effectively to help them learn. Professor Edna Krabappel, a Psychology professor, told me this story:

Edna: Yes, I had four preps and I was exhausted, but I did use humor whenever I could. The faculty was, I think the average age was about 50, and it was my hometown, so I think the students could relate to me. They talked with me and here I was: this new teacher with all those seasoned faculty members and teachers, and we did not have too much in common and they just looked at me. There was one teacher, a woman faculty who was raising five kids. She had married, had five kids, and then divorced and she was raising those five kids on her salary. And she had them doing chores and really toeing the line. But she befriended me and helped me learn how to teach and she used humor.

One of the other things I learned early my career was that humor helps us connect with our students. This school was old, and it had wood floors, and there was a huge heater in the back of the room. The students who sat in the back near the heater were warm, and everyone else was cold. I kept complaining that the front two burners seemed to be blocked. I was creative and rigged up this stick with a match on it to light the heater, and I could reach back with this stick to the back and light the thing. Very creative! Anyway, I kept complaining every day about this heater and the blocked front burners. I filled out a form to get it fixed every day. One day the principal came into the teacher's lounge, and his eyebrows were all burned off and his face was all burned. He got tired of me complaining about this heater, and he reached in without the long stick and the stove took off and burned his face and all his eyebrows were gone!

K: (Laughing). Oh my gosh! That is so funny!

Edna: Anyway, I had a great relationship with those students because we were cold together and in the fall we were hot together! There was no air conditioning there in that part of the country, and I could walk around the room and there would be puddles of water from the students dripping on the floor. It was hot!

K: Goodness! It does get hot. I cannot imagine teaching in that kind of room.

Edna: One day I was cold. At the front of the class it was so cold that I could not feel the bottom part of my legs, and so during the break between classes I went in and just leaned my feet on the heater and

whoosh! I felt something hot, and it just melted my panty hose up to my knees! They just melted! During lunch I had to run downtown and get another pair of pantyhose! When you are that hot or that cold, you bond with your students.

This professor exhibited humor throughout her interview. She is an energetic, attractive woman who invited me to her home to discuss humor. She is a tall woman who laughs frequently and truly enjoys life. I heard her make a presentation at a conference about how to bring joy to your life, and she seems to truly practice what she preaches about having fun every day. When I asked her about advice for new teachers about humor, she replied that everyone should know at least three jokes. Then she added: three clean jokes!

Professor Mary Albright, who teaches Psychology, told me she learned from an influential teacher and the responses from one of her early classes. I asked her to tell me about her mentor.

Mary: His name was Jack Johnson. Jack Johnson is a teacher here, and I had him, and he also uses a lot of humor. Just makes people comfortable. I am going to say he was a big influence.

K: You learned from watching him. In your early teaching did humor play a role? And you kind of said at first not much...

Mary: I think it was but it was not deliberate. It was just my personality coming out and then I finally made the connection. When they started laughing, I noticed cause-effect or at least the linkage. Immediately after the class has a laugh, questions start. And so it finally dawned on me. It is such an important thing.

Speech and Communications Professor Charles Kingsfield told me he had several significant teachers who gave him advice. One high school teacher convinced him to change his major from political science to speech. She even convinced him to change

colleges from his accepted university to transfer to one with a really good speech program. Another professor encouraged him to continue his Master's program in speech, and his success in mentoring other speech students at tournaments seemed to motivate him to become a professor. He was inspired to become a professor because of his success as a teaching assistant. As a graduate student at a large university, Professor Kingsfield described how the speech director would lecture to a large group of students, and then he and the other graduate assistants would take smaller groups to teach individual public speaking. Professor Kingsfield gave this example of his teaching assistant experience:

Charles: When I was teaching there, I had my experience of corps guys coming in there. The story that I tell was the giant guy who came in there, and he is like as big as I am, wearing his big outfit, senior boots, buzz cut, and he is up there scared to death. Frightened as can be about giving speeches. And the whole class can see it, and I tell the students he kind of stood- kind of like this [Charles--standing up and shifting his feet in a marching manner and swaying] marching in place as he talked and trying to get through it, you know he was really walking his way through it [now marching even more dramatically!]. But he kept looking straight ahead, ramrod straight, looking straight ahead, and he was kind of giving this speech like he is talking to the troops. On his first speech I put that he looked like John Wayne. And he was like: "What do you mean?" And I said: "It looks like you are going to draw on us at any moment with that big get up and everything." And he's like: "AHH." You know. And over time I was able to talk him down and the real technique, and I was telling Julie, my wife, about this today. The real technique with all those guys is to talk them out of their uniforms. Because if they think with their uniforms on, then they are like talking to the troops and they talk in a particular style. If you can get them to forget about that and become a person again, then they become more easy to listen to and they are able to relax about what they are doing.

When I asked Professor Dick Solomon, a Psychology teacher, about a significant teacher who helped to mold his teaching identity, he described a teacher who used bad jokes.

Dick: I had one teacher, a biochemistry II teacher, who influenced me. His name was Dr. Carryone, and he was a great teacher who made biochemistry interesting! He was a great guy who told terrible jokes and gave funny examples about biochemistry. Pretty geeky, I know. (laughs).

He also recounted how he could still remember some of the professor's examples and jokes after thirty years! He then shared one of the humorous illustrations with me.

Psychology Professor Gabe Kotter shared that the most significant teacher he remembered was very personable and met with students during breaks. Although he was very professional, the students and Mr. Kotter enjoyed the social interaction with this professor. I feel that Mr. Kotter has modeled his teaching identity and persona on this favorite teacher. I have seen Mr. Kotter interact with students, and he will talk and laugh with them, but he maintains a very professional demeanor. He is well-groomed, and his dress is always very trim. This desire to be very meticulous carries over to his teaching. He wants his students to learn, and he wants to be very organized as he teaches. I asked Professor Gabe Kotter about his use of humor in teaching, and he replied:

Gabe: (sigh). I like it. That's another challenge. I would like to learn more. When I thought about this interview that we were going to have today I jotted down some notes, I discovered maybe I use humor maybe less than I would like and yet at the same time, I have to really think about how I use humor in the classroom and then sometimes I think about ways I didn't think about before. I like it.

Professor Kotter made notes for our interview, so he could do a good job discussing humor in the classroom, and he shared he wanted to learn more about using humor. This is an example of how a good teacher is prepared and also strives to improve his/her teaching skills. Humor is one way Professor Kotter would like to stretch and try new



methods. Humor is such a part of his teaching identity he had to reflect on how he uses humor to share with me.

The professors I interviewed have modeled their teaching style from their mentors. They have matured and developed their teaching identities, and one of the major means was by having a strong sense of humor. The ability to make the best of a situation and conquer barriers is a true skill for teachers. Humor is an attribute that is very useful for professors. The following story demonstrates how Nursing Professor Anne Sullivan Macy overcame some major impediments from her first year of teaching by maintaining a positive sense of humor:

Anne: I taught at Western College, in Louisiana, and the first full semester that I taught, I was actually hired to teach clinical classes for someone who was pregnant, but the first full semester that I taught, we team taught, and I didn't have my Master's, so I was paired with someone who had her Master's degree, and she fell off a horse and broke her arms, and so I had to teach this respiratory unit all by myself. And it was in the spring and in January, and it had snowed, so we didn't have electricity on campus, so the very first class in front of anybody, and I was sitting on the stage, in the dark with students and we had little penlights and flashlights. But it worked out.

K: This is unreal! And they are trying to take notes in the dark?

Anne: Because nursing never stops for anything. We're martyrs, as you know.

Another teacher, Professor, Roy Hinkley, who teaches Physics, had three significant mentors he tried to emulate and who shaped his teaching identity. They sounded fun, unusual, and demanding. Professor Hinkley perceives good teachers as being amusing.

Roy: Oh, yeah! I think I would say I had three. They were the big influences. One was my third grade teacher and she –how did she influence me? She was an Oilers fan and I was a Steelers fan, (laughing) and she influenced me and we teased each other a lot.

K: Yah? (laughing)

Roy: She was just a good teacher, I don't really remember her name beyond that.

K: That's OK.

Roy: In high school I had this teacher who eventually came to teach here, actually, and he –his name was David Jones. Did you meet him? Did you know him?

K: No.

Roy: He was a math teacher here for a while. He had long hair, a long beard. He had a bolo on and this was my first class in high school and I walked in and he was teaching this class. I thought: "What kind of nut do I have here?" Well, he was a hoot. He was funny. He would do anything to make students learn... and I ended up having him for half of that year and I had him for junior year again and for two classes in my senior year. I had him for a lot of classes in high school. I remember one of my favorite things he would do: he would be teaching a difficult concept, and answering questions, and going over and over it, and somebody would say, "Ohhh," and he would say "That's why I came to work today." He was just such a good teacher. He would just love for people to learn.

K: (laughing) I love that line that he would do just anything to make students learn,

Roy: Oh, yeah. Anything he could do. I guess my third one would be my sophomore year in college I had a year long class in physiology. Hard, I think that was the hardest class I had in college. But the teacher was all about learning. He was very practical, told you what you needed to know, and he was funny, too.

As I sat and interviewed this professor, I reflected on his teaching methods and his teaching identity. He is known for his integrity and his ability to get along well with other professors and administrators. I have observed him serving as a mediator on

committees when there was conflict. Professor Roy Hinkley is able to weave his values and personal characteristics in all his academic duties. He seems centered on his true self and being able to share his knowledge with his students and yet still have fun in his classes. He has modeled his teaching identity from an elementary teacher, a math, and also an anatomy and physiology professor.

The professors in this study seemed to have high self esteem and be knowledgeable in their fields. They seemed to be predisposed toward humor at an early age and despite differences in their use of humor, all expressed the belief that humor was pervasive in their lives. They also discerned that teachers should use humor in ways that fit their personalities. Professors should be comfortable in their teaching techniques including the use of levity.

During the interviews I asked them if they could give a new teacher advice about the use of humor in the classroom. Professor Anne Sullivan Macy, who is a Nursing teacher, said:

Anne: I would tell them to find out what works for them. We hired a faculty member who wanted to do what I am doing, but it did not work for her. It did not suit her personality, and we were talking and you have to figure out what will work for you. Not to be and if it doesn't work, then just go in and say: Hey, that didn't work, did it? And not to be afraid to try again.

Another Psychology Professor, Minerva McGonagall, expresses the idea to be yourself in the classroom and don't try to use humor if it does not feel natural. I asked her a question about what advice she would give to new teachers.

K: What would you tell a new teacher about using humor in the classroom? Would you encourage them?

Minerva: Be careful. There are certain safe ways to do it. Most of my humor comes from my own personal stories so I can make fun of me, so that's ok.

K: That's self deprecating. Students like it. Be yourself?

Minerva: Self deprecating humor is safe. To a point. Stay away from anything that does not come naturally to you. Stick with just what works for you. See how it works for you or you may not like it. I cannot imagine a colleague ever coming to me saying: "I think I want to be funny in the classroom."

I think I would go: "Hmm. Go with what works for you." I was telling my friends earlier you were coming in, and we were joking, and Carol, who I think would be a stitch in class because she is in person, and Hazel, who is not here anymore, but I teach a learning community with her. Hazel is not a funny professor. That's just not who she is and she was there and I said, "Carol, you should stay and meet with Karen, because she will probably want to talk with you." And I didn't realize that I had intentionally omitted Hazel and Hazel said: "I'm not funny." And I thought: "Oh, shit, sorry." But she's not and if she came to me one day and said: "I think I want to be funny in the classroom." I think I would discourage her.

Professor Gabe Kotter, who teaches Psychology, also shared the idea we should be true to our own personalities when he said:

Gabe: I would tell them exactly what I told you. I would encourage them to use humor, read the instructors' manuals, listen to people who had ideas about what works in classrooms about what makes people laugh or what makes students learn. But I would still encourage the teacher to try to stay within themselves and do what was natural for them.

Professor Roy Hinkley supervises and hires many adjunct instructors at his college because he serves as a chair in the Science department, and he gives new teachers this advice about using humor:

Roy: I talk to a lot of new teachers, as adjuncts, they come through here. What I tell them is number one the most important thing here is learning. But a big part of that is active learning so I definitely ask them to be active and I have never encouraged humor specifically because I think that's a style thing.

K: It is.

Roy: If it fits into your style, you should go for it.

K: Your personality?

Roy: Yes. Because I have also seen people try to be humorous and fail at it and that is doesn't always look good. When I sit down in a class and I am evaluating somebody using humor and doing it effectively, I always encourage it and I always congratulate them on their ability to do that.

The participants expressed a strong belief in following your teaching identity in all ways and particularly in the use of humor. Professor Dick Solomon stresses how humor should fit the teacher's personality, but also humor should fit the context and topic of study. Here is a quote from Professor Solomon about giving advice to a new Psychology teacher:

Dick: I would tell a teacher to use as much humor as they are comfortable with. It is not in everyone's personality to be humorous or use humor. I was very uncomfortable when I first began teaching. Humor is not for everyone. I know this person down the hall who can use irony in their teaching that I could never pull off, but he uses it quite well and it fits his personality. I will tell a new teacher to be careful and make sure the humor fits the topic. I would tell them don't just put in a joke or story, but make sure it fits the context. Make sure it fits the context or the topic you are covering.

Another reflection of the personality of the professor can be seen in how they banter with the students. Although this research was centered on the deliberate use of humor in the classroom, several instructors told me they frequently use spontaneous humor, too. In fact, several of them admit to talking playfully with their students. Sociology Professor Indiana Jones made this remark about his relationship with students when I asked him the ways he used humor:

Indiana: There are a lot of things, kind of smart alecky, but not in a mean way, not towards any one, maybe toward myself. Not exactly self deprecating humor but more smart alecky towards me or situations that I have encountered. Then if you get students, the right kind of student that wants to be engaged, and have that kind of banter you can do that a little bit. I don't think you should do that too much but it may not be a bad thing but a good way of engaging someone who is kind of loud and obnoxious and boisterous who can kind of deal with it. And you should also talk to them at other times so you're not picking on them in class. But once you do it a couple of times you have a relationship.

K: So you do some bantering...

Indiana: Yeah, appropriate. Nothing mean and I think it is pretty obvious when somebody wants to do that or not.

Professor Indiana Jones is a teacher with a great sense of humor. During the interview, I laughed frequently. I asked him a question about not being able to use humor, and he crossed his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. He asked me to notice his defensive position. I had to laugh! He wears his hair long and in a ponytail. I frequently see him chatting in the hallways with students. Dr. Jones is a professor who is well liked by students and well respected by faculty.

Similarly, Professor Edna Krabappel, who teaches Psychology, also enjoys a little give-and-take with her students. When I questioned her about how she interacts in the classroom, she explained to me:

Edna: I am also good on my feet, though. If a student says something, I can come right back with a pretty good remark!

Professor Roy Hinkley, a Physics and Engineering Professor, describes one teaching demonstration where he teases the students by tricking them during the activity. Here is the story he shared with me during the interview:

Roy: I have a lot of toys, physics toys, right, that I use as examples, demonstrations, and what I do is there is one thing called the ring launcher. It is just a coil of wire, you put an aluminum ring on it, and you press a button, and through the magic of physics, the ring gets thrown up into the air. Just through invisible forces, and I do this several times. I change certain things and demonstrate it. I have two rings and one is a whole ring and one has a slit in it. And the one with the slit in it won't launch and so what I do is, I launch the good ring and launch it and launch it and launch it. And then I put the one with a slit on and offer it to a student: "Would you like to try it?" And then they press it and it doesn't launch and I say: "Just press the button. Come on. Just press it. Can't you do it?" And which is maybe a little bit teasing. But by this point in the semester I have built up a relationship with them, and they are comfortable with this kind of thing and so for one thing, so for one thing, everyone enjoys it. And then somebody usually figures it out and they point it out, Oh, you switched the ring and something's different. Yeah, that's right and we talk about why. So now they have this mental picture, and if it was me, so if I ever tried it again, everybody would check me to make sure it didn't have a slit because then they would know the current wouldn't go around. Then, so they will remember the concept because they don't want to get tricked.

This type of bantering and teasing is a part of the professor's personality and is reflected in their relationships with students.

Another area of the teaching identity that emerged in this finding concerns the creativity of the professors in their use of humor. The ten participants discussed many different ways of using humor.

### Creativity

How do college professors intentionally use humor in their classrooms to improve classroom climate? When I asked the participants to tell me the ways they utilize humor, or I watched them during observations, I was amazed and impressed at the creativity of their methods. The participants shared many creative methods in their use of humor in the

classroom including analogies, personal stories, cartoons, humorous videos, television episodes, student projects, costumes, skits, role-plays, exam questions, and worksheets.

One example of an imaginative use of humor was given by Professor Charles Kingsfield, as a Speech professor who feels it is important for students to get to know him and trust him. He teaches speech and communication, and he told me his students always seem to be hungry so he uses food analogies to describe corresponding similarities between food and speeches. He feels students are always thinking about food.

Charles: Well, like a speech is like a sandwich. Like when you go to the store, it's a figurative analogy. Right. A speech is like a sandwich. When you go to the sandwich store, you don't buy the sandwich based on the bread. Right, although the bread is important to the sandwich, you are really buying what is in the middle: meatball sandwich, turkey, bacon, avocado. You know what I mean, OK? And the students are notoriously bad about skipping meals. So if they are in here and if they haven't had breakfast or if it's 12:30 and they haven't had lunch, I am making examples of food, and I am always talking about food. And it drives them crazy, and what happens is: I am making an example and teaching them figurative analogies. Teaching them how the largest part of your speech needs to be the middle like the bread on the outside like the introduction or the conclusion, but the bread is important. Moldy bread, bad sandwich. So you have to have a good intro and conclusion, but then at the same time, I notice to myself I am making another food analogy and I say: "Oh right, you guys skipped meals, didn't you? Sorry about that and here's another food example" and after a while they are shaking their fists at me saying: "Stop it!"

Professor Kingsfield discusses using a personal story to show differences in American culture, expectations, and communication. He and his wife went to Chicago for a speech convention and had an interesting experience.

Charles: Well, we went to Bennigan's and the server says: "What would you like to drink?" and I say: "Dr. Pepper." Right? Safe, I know what I want. And my wife says: "I'm gonna have tea." Now the server goes away, comes back, gives me my Dr. Pepper and gives her a cup of hot water and a tea bag. And my wife looks at the cup, looks



at the server, looks at the cup, and I am leaning back, with my arms folded, thinking: “This is going to be good!” The whole class is laughing because you know what is going to happen!!

She says: “This is not what I asked for.”

The waiter says; “But that is what you said.”

“But that is not what I meant!”

And have you ever had a conversation like this with somebody? I’m speaking English here. How can you get this wrong? (Using a high female voice).

The class is just cracking up. But I say: look, she left the Texas context where it is always hot and what kind of tea do you want?

No matter where you are, any time, what kind of tea do you want in Texas?

Iced tea!

K: Always! You have to say hot tea to get hot tea in Texas.

Charles: So in Chicago, in November, when it is 30 degrees there is nobody who has wanted iced tea for months. And I say: she forgot all about that and was irritated to find that they had not brought her what she had asked for. It was a violation of expectations. Another concept. By the time she sent back her hot tea, you need to understand: they are back there trying to figure out how to brew a single glass of iced tea. They don’t have a big vat, AND you are not going to get a re-fill! And the class is laughing and I say, but you can see how context influences your communication.

K: (laughing). Will they remember this story?

Charles: Yes! Because I am going to come back to it again and again because I can use that story in like five different ways. And they are busting up here. So I mean, the first day I am using that kind of stuff.

Professor Kingsfield is a professor who enjoys his students. On the day of our interview he was giving an exam. He is a professor who had been recommended to me by more than one person over the years as a teacher who uses humor. He is a fast talking professor who tells great stories. His eyes light up as he discusses his students and his family. He prides himself as a teacher who is able to help students overcome their fear of

public speaking. He feels by bonding with the students and making them comfortable with the professor and the classroom, they will conquer their dread of giving speeches. He speaks with enthusiasm and frequently uses voices and becomes animated about his classes.

Using personal stories about their own lives was one way almost every participant shared with me. Professors can disclose a story with their classes and make a connection with their students. It is one way of linking the discipline's content and making it more individual. Speech Professor Minerva McGonagall uses personal stories to relate to her students and present topics for discussion. Here is a personal story from Professor Minerva McGonagall:

Minerva: We would talk about marriage and family and how your life will change. I ask them to brainstorm about how you think your life will be different, and one of the things they always come up with on their own is privacy. And they say: "I don't know if I'll have as much privacy." And that's one of my favorites. And I tell this story about my son coming into my bath. Do you want to hear the stories or do you just want me to tell...

K: No, I would love to hear the story!

Minerva: Ok, my husband is the most amazing man on earth. He is generous and kind and the most fabulous father. And a great partner. So I had been working a lot of late nights, and I was also coaching my college forensic team so I was there until 11 or 10 at night. So I called and said: "I'm on my way home," and he said: "How did your day go?" And I said: "I am very tired," and he said, "Well, I have a surprise for you when you get home." And he said: "Call me when you get off the exit ramp." So I called him and said: "OK." So I get home, and he takes my bag off my shoulder, and he puts a cup of my favorite coffee fixed just the way I like it in my hand, and he says: "Go upstairs. There is a treat for you waiting in the bathroom. And I said: "Really?" And I go in, and there is the IPOD on the speaker, and a note says, "Push play," and he had made a "chill" folder, there were candles lit, and there was a bath full. I said he is the greatest guy ever, and I love you so much. So I

enjoyed my coffee, and I got into my bathtub, and I am feeling all of the pressure of my day roll away slowly and then: Bam! The door comes bursting open, and my four-year-old, Nathan, who is just without a filter, comes in and he goes: “Hey, Mom! What are you doing?”

K: Oh! (Laughing).

Minerva: “Taking a bath, Nate.” And he goes, “Oh, that’s cool. I can see your boobs!” My suds are gone by this time and he says: (Minerva using child’s voice). “How was your day?”

K: Did he really?

Minerva: Yeah. And I said: “Why aren’t you in bed?” And he says: “I heard you come in, and I thought I’d say HI!!!!” So I said, “Hi Nate!” And he goes “Um, what are you doing?” And I said: “Taking a bath, Nate.” (Using a small boy’s voice): “I like this music. I think I’ve heard this song before.”

He goes: “I’ve got to poop.” And I looked at him like: Are you serious? He goes over to the toilet and he says: (with Nate’s voice straining): “Dada took us to the park today.”

My students are just crying and laughing. And I am like: my bath was pretty much ruined at that point. My sweet husband comes upstairs and goes: “Nathan! What are you doing?” (then she begins to use her hands to fan her nose). “Oh, geez, Nathan!” So then my daughter gets up and says: “What’s going on?” And she comes into the bath, and then the baby starts crying and I said: “I bet you all wonder why I have invited you all here.” It explains the lack of privacy to a tee. Guaranteed laughs all the time, especially when I act out all of the people which I frequently do. I am huge story teller and very expressive. So when I get to all these stories, it is much funnier if I do all the people.

K: This is a great story (laughing)! It’s a party! Very dramatic!

Minerva McGonagall was one of the professors who had been referred to me by a director for teaching excellence, so I did not know her before our interview. She is an attractive young woman who was very animated from the start. I can see her telling this story, and her dramatic style would be very delightful for the students. We also had a

challenge in our interview dynamics, because her office is located in a modular trailer on her college campus. Throughout the interview I could sense that the other professors were listening because they would occasionally make comments. At one point Professor McGonagall told a story, there was the sound of a woman laughing, and Professor McGonagall shouted, “Shut up, Suzanne!” I don’t think having an audience influenced her answers because she said her office had been in the trailer for a few years, and they were accustomed to the lack of privacy.

During our interview I asked Professor Minerva McGonagall about her use of humor during the early part of her teaching career, and she explains a little about her classroom behavior and even calls herself “a smart ass.”

K: What role did humor play in your early teaching? Did you plan to use humor early in your teaching career?

Minerva: I don’t think it did. I think I am a bit of a smart ass. And, shut up, Suzanne! (Talking to another professor over the dividers in the modular trailer where her office was located.) She is like mocking me from the hall. Oh, yeah, this is like my favorite place on earth.

K: OK. (laughing). You can hear everything here! I had somebody else say they were a smart aleck and I had to figure out how to spell aleck. I like smart ass! How does that...?

Minerva: So things would come out naturally in the way I am explaining stuff, so students would laugh and I would go: “Whee! That’s fun!” And I would remember that little quip and use it in the next class. And if you look through my lecture notes, you will see: content, theory, and then it will say, Steve’s story about the Ford. So that I know whenever I am talking about how we process stimulation and the content of perception, that motivation is one of the four factors and then I always tell the Steve’s, my husband’s name is Steve, story about the Ford. So it is something they identify with and they think it is funny.

Several of the professors shared they used humorous cartoons in their power point presentations to get the attention of their students. This is a relatively low risk humorous technique, and one they often mentioned as a suggestion for new teachers to try. They also mentioned using movies, video clips, and You Tube videos. Professor Indiana Jones shared his use of humor in Sociology through television programs.

Indiana: I used *The Simpsons*, I used *King of the Hill*, and I have even used a couple of Seinfeld episodes that relate to the subject matter.

K: Ok, I have to think about Seinfeld for a while. All I can think about is how it is about nothing.

Indiana: Well, not everything works because you can't use a recent Simpsons episode, because there are like 15 different plots in there. In the first couple of years it would stay with something. One example of *The Simpsons*, let's just go there first. I am thinking about the one where there is a 3 eyed fish, Blinky. They find him in the river, near the nuclear plant. The whole thing is about that and Mr. Burns and he is running for governor, and he does want to get shut down and the whole episode is about that, so it works well for that. It works well talking about the environment, the government, and that kind of thing.

K: Oh yeah! Environmental issues. I can think about the last Seinfeld episode where there are all those ethics issues.

Indiana: (laughing). There is one *King of the Hill*, I can give as an example where when we talk about gender where Bobby finds out he is a big boy, and so he has to wear husky clothes, and he has to go this place called H. Dumpty's to buy his clothes.

K: And he wants to model. (laughing).

Indiana: Yeah, modeling. And his dad tries to get the point across that this is not what young boys should do. And it gets into the mother-father view. It works pretty well for that.

K: It's perfect. Didn't you use one whole movie?

Indiana: For honors classes we watched *Office Space*, and it is hilarious. It works great when we are talking about bureaucracy.

K: I remember when you used *Lost*.

Indiana: I have used several episodes of *Lost*, which has some humor in it.

K: And also sociological issues, too.

Another creative teaching method using humor that was mentioned by several instructors was allowing students to provide the stories or using student projects to illustrate concepts. Psychology Professor Mary Albright told me several stories how her students have become engaged through outside assignments. One example was:

Mary: I had two girls who went out in a car with a video camera to film and demonstrate motion parallax, and then at the end, the girl who was filming, the girls did this intentional humor thing, and I show it to students every semester with their permission, and they used intentional humor too, because at the end of their motion parallax demonstration, the girl who was filming yelled: "Pull over the car, I'm going to be sick!" And she pretends to be sick illustrating motion sickness.

K: And conflict of the senses. I love it. They will never forget this. Is this a project that you assign?

Mary: It is funny. I'm telling you. No, that's why I say I know they are engaged. Because they are going out on their own and spending all this time doing this work.

She also uses her Facebook page to allow them to contact her. The students also send her online videos and information about content in her classes.

Mary: Originally I was spending an enormous amount of time on You Tube, to try to find these clips that would illustrate whatever I was teaching about, preferably funny ones, and then before you know it, the kids were sending me clips and I have this huge library of them. So useful. The other thing is those LOL cats.

K: No? What's that? Low?

Mary: No. LOL. Laughing out loud cats. I was informed of this, so, stay with the kids. Stay with the times. It's a website and let me

show you and I use this a lot and the kids (going to computer and pulling up website) love them.

K: I thought I knew all these. The other day I found a new book, that defibrillator book, and he has lots of clip art. Art things, Far Side jokes, they are great. I got it.

Mary: The kids visit these sites on their own and so whenever they see, here's Curiosity may not have killed the cat. That one is not relevant, but let me show you I actually have one for... When I put these things come up and I put them in my slides and lectures, first of all,

K: And they will remember.

Mary: And they do, and they will tell me that. And they will say: "I remember that picture you put on there." Because I find these students learn much more visually than they used to.

K: The literature says if you can engage more than one sense like if they read it, and then hear it and if you can tie it all in emotionally, they will learn. I am not using emotions like I should and I'm trying to get their emotions into it more. Seeing and hearing, they like it better. You think they are more visual?

Mary: Yes! I think they are more visual as a population or a generation than they used to be and I think it has much to do with the Internet.

K: They're not reading the textbook. If they read it on a website, they are going to remember it.

Mary: It's just the way they operate. I also have a Facebook page, obviously, I keep it appropriate and I find that those students who even though they enjoy the class and are engaged in the material are still shy and so it is a way for them to ask questions about the course material or share. Yes, and they ask questions on Facebook, and they will find something on the Internet and upload it on the Facebook page, and the other students can see it, too. I had one student that made this for me (hands me a photo album filled with pictures) illustrating color constancy.

Professor Mary Albright pointed out how students may have different learning

styles and different methods may appeal to different students. She uses current sources of humor that the students will enjoy. Her use of Facebook and other networking sites help to keep her connected to her students. Some individuals may ask her questions on her website that they may not ask her in class. Students also use humor in their class projects. Professor Albright also showed me an air cannon that she will shoot at students in her large auditorium classes who fall asleep. It makes a very loud noise and shoots air at the student! However, she is an energetic and lively professor whose exciting style of teaching would make sleeping in class very difficult.

Another professor, Anne Sullivan Macy, uses some very creative methods to help her nursing students learn.

Anne: I used to theme dress. I taught nutrition, so when I taught nutrition, and I have to kind of laugh because of my nutritional habits, I used to tell students, I hate to teach nutrition because you stop and look and see what I am eating, and I have to eat right for this class. But I went out and rented a Carmen Miranda hat, and I wore that to class, with fruit. And then I bought earrings and shirts, and what have you. And the students like that. When I taught growth and development, pediatric nursing, and when I taught adolescence I would go out at every break and change clothes, and one time I would come in as the little cheerleader, and I would have the cheerleader outfit on. Or I would come in as the pop rocker or whatever and students like that. They laugh and it helps them remember, and that's kind of fun.

She also has some other costumes she wears to help her students.

Anne: When I teach neurological, I found a, after Halloween, remember the old Operation game? They had the character with the nose and everything and then Joanie Lowe sewed, it's when I teach spinal cord, so she sewed all of the dermatomes in different colors, so I would wear that. The students like that. It is of the human body, it's got the lungs and the heart. I think I have it hanging up in here somewhere.



K: It's like a little skeleton suit? A little neuro suit? What impact does humor have on your students. You mention you use it to loosen up.

Anne: I do talk to students about learning styles and studying and so forth. And I share with them that in my last semester when I was in nursing school, I used to study in the lobby in my cap and gown. It made me feel successful. So I would wear my cap and gown. I was making good grades, why would I worry about somebody else? Sometimes you have to get over to them if something works for you, you can do it. So when I teach neuro, when we are doing the brain, I buy all of them white ball caps and I have them put them on backwards and the brim becomes the brain stem, and they all get to decorate and do it, and it has to have all the parts of the brain and the functions and stuff. And then we have a contest, and they have learned that aspect of it. And then I don't have to take up time, which I don't have, reviewing anatomy and physiology.

One of the professors, Gabe Kotter, told me he uses skits and role-plays to get students involved in psychological topics. He also uses stories to help students to learn, but he weaves stories by incorporating the students' names. Here is the example he told me:

Gabe: Well, one of the ways I always intentionally use humor that I enjoy, and the students really enjoy is in classical conditioning. Describing elements of classical conditioning, I slowly begin developing a story, and I always incorporate the students in the classroom. It is almost as if the rest of the class is learning about the other members of the class, even though it is fictitious. One of the stories I've developed is about a story of a guy going into a club, or a story about a guy taking out his girlfriend for her birthday or Valentine's Day, going to Carraba's, listening to music on the PA, and smelling the basil and tomato sauce and creating the whole stimulus environment.

K: The students' names? Tying it to classical conditioning?

Gabe: Tying it to classical conditioning.

Another method that was unusual was described by the engineering and physics teacher, Roy Hinkley. He is very creative and asks his students to sing to

remember a concept. I could tell he wanted to do a good job during our interview. He also made a list of ideas to share with me. He seemed a little nervous at first, but very quickly as he talked, he laughed more and seemed to relax. He also told me he had never considered his use of humor until I told him that someone had nominated him to be one of the professors to be interviewed. Professor Hinkley has a wonderful sense of humor and the reputation of being a well-liked and well-respected instructor on campus. Here is one of the stories he described to me about using humor and active learning:

Roy: I have to teach them about phases. I split the class in half and have them sing Row, row, row your boat. What's the right musical term? Canons or rounds? Rounds, if this side sings row, row, row your boat and as soon as they finish that the other side starts singing row, row, row your boat, so they are out of sync. It shows them a phase difference. So the activity does that, but it also they will without fail, remember the concept and also laugh!

K: Yes! And they have gotten active and laughed, so it's double. They talk about if you can use more than one sense like if show them a cartoon, and also played them some music, it was two senses. Like you got them involved, singing, and looking at their friends...

TP: Yes. Right. They are worried about how they sound, getting off. They're engaged, I don't want to say they are relaxed, because they are very self conscious, but yeah, the fact that I did that last semester and in my evaluations, it was so funny, that was one of the most common responses: "He makes us sing!"

Professor Hinkley also used a game show concept to discuss information. He was nervous about trying something so different and humorous during his first year of teaching.

Roy: Yeah, yeah. I remember wanting to try innovative stuff, but being extremely scared to do it. I remember one day bringing in because I was teaching about capacitors and I had this idea to relate capacitors to Family Feud. So I made a Family Feud board. And I was just so scared that I thought my heart was going to just bounce out of my chest.

I was just so scared. I don't know why. I was just scared to try it and I thought it might be dumb.

K: And? Was it? Did they like it?

Roy: Yeah! They liked it. It worked and so I still use it. I still use it.

K: Is it a big board?

Roy: It's like a big foam cardboard with poster board size. And I cut it out and I have eventually moved it to Powerpoint.

Another idea several professors shared with me is to use humor on their exams.

Professor Hinkley related this story about a creative use of humor.

Roy: On exams I have, well, like on physics exams, for example, there will be a series of multiple choice questions followed by problems. At least one of the multiple choice questions is going to have one answer that is just ridiculous.

K: Right? Really? Not on the test bank?

Roy: No.

K: Can you think of any? A, B, C, D, and E is?

Roy: Here is an engineering one that I can think of: countersinking is when you drill a hole a certain way, and they have five choices. You know, they are very technical choices, the first four and then it says: When the kitchen countertop is illegally dumped in a nearby lake.

K: (laughing) That's good! And they laugh when they are taking the test.

Roy: And that is part of the relaxing thing. Here they are taking a test, They're stressed, they're upset, they're worried, they're thinking how they are going to do, they're worried about getting the right answer. They laugh and they actually calm down.

Other creative techniques to utilize humor in the classroom were described by Professor Edna Krapappel. She described how she makes jokes about the supplies they

need to buy for statistics. She tells the students their brains are their best calculators, and she uses a statistics book called: *Statistics with a Sense of Humor*. During an observation in her class, she had a cartoon and a joke on her Powerpoint presentation and after she discussed mean, median, and mode in statistics class, she gave the students a handout using a true/false format. The question at the top was: Why did the potato leave Idaho? When you completed the hand-out correctly, the answer was: to be a French fry! The students were giggling as they completed the worksheet. She smiled frequently at the students and checked for understanding several times. Once she went back to a table and looked at a student's work and then praised him when he completed the problem.

These are a few of the ways these professors creatively use humor in their classrooms and express their identities as professors. The next finding is about how the participants were very student-centered in their teaching behavior.

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#### Student-Centered Professors

I found the professors in this study were extremely student-centered, and they used humor as one way to connect with their students and create a positive classroom climate. These professors concentrate on learning and students. Each of them could quickly tell me why they used humor and were well aware of the benefits to produce a productive and pleasant classroom environment. However, when I asked them if using humor helped

them personally, each and every one of them had to stop and think about the individual advantages.

### *Benefits for Students*

Cornett (1986) outlines 13 ways to improve classroom climate and achieve educational goals focusing on humor including: (1) attracts attention and provokes thought, (2) liberates creative capacities, (3) helps gain friends, (4) improves communication, (5) soothes difficult moments, (6) can stimulate intercultural study, (7) promotes health, (8) develops a positive attitude and self image, (9) motivates and energizes, (10) solves problems, (11) increases quality and quantity of students' reading, (12) reinforces desired behaviors, and (13) has entertainment value. When I asked the participants: "What do you see as the benefits of using humor in the classroom?" and "How do you think humor affects student learning?" Their responses reflect almost every one of these ways, and there were some additional benefits they suggested. I will review the responses about benefits for students that relate to the learning process. These benefits included relaxing the class, connecting the students to each other, connecting with the teacher, gaining attention for the topic, and engaging the students. The professors also mentioned how humor was a benefit regarding student-teacher relationships by connecting to the students, establishing rapport, seeing the professor as a real person, role modeling appropriate behavior, and having fun.

Professors Kingsfield, Krabappel, and Kotter all mentioned how humor can loosen students up. Nursing Professor Anne Sullivan Macy suggested that humor breaks the ice

and helps the students to focus their attention on the present topic. Professor Dick Solomon, who teaches Psychology, stated:

Dick: I think humor breaks the tension. It allows us to be natural. It helps students to focus their attention. I really think using humor helps the students to learn more. (Stops to think). I really think about what I am going to teach and how it will help the student.

Professor Kotter, a Psychology teacher, also felt that students connect to the professor, with themselves, with each other through humor, and he said:

Gabe: Some of the benefits would be: it loosens people up and allows them to connect to themselves and each other, and it allows them to connect with the instructor. It also makes it more interesting to the students. It is not so stiff and dry in class where they spend most of their day. That's what I hear from them.

Professor Dick Solomon also feels getting the attention of the class contributes to their learning. When I asked about his philosophy of teaching he told me:

Dick: My philosophy of teaching is that I am here to help students learn NOT to teach them, and humor is important. They have to pay attention and learn. Humor helps to keep their attention. In order for them to learn I have to get their attention either by being loud or being funny. I think humor helps them to learn. When we talked about emotion and memory I think humor helps them with their emotions. If they are just sitting and writing, they are not using their emotions. If they are stressed out about something in their lives, they are not learning. If they are sad, they are not learning.

I don't try to encourage conflict in class, but if they are in a good discussion and there is conflict, they are learning. I think that Bloom's taxonomy is important. If you just want them to repeat what you taught them, that is what they learn. I want to help them learn. I want them to learn. Does that make sense?

K: Absolutely.

Dick: You can start with a difficult concept and then go step by step to help them learn. I think we overestimate how much we can teach them. There is so much information in our courses. I want them to learn.

My personality is outgoing. I want them to see me as knowledgeable and outgoing.

K: What about classroom climate? Does humor affect your classroom climate?

Dick: Yes, if students are comfortable they will learn. If the students are nervous, humor will help them break the tension. They will laugh and learn.

As student-centered educators, the participants frequently mentioned they believe humor helps the students to learn, memorize, and remember information. Sociology Professor Indiana Jones expressed his feelings about humor and memory:

Indiana: I think when I say: “Remember when we watched so and so?” And they get all excited. Here is my general philosophy. I think there are a lot of different ways you can teach. You can use examples, you have to give examples, if you don’t, I don’t think you are teaching at all. But you can use the extreme examples which I like, and I think they can work, and you can also give the subtle examples which I think are often overlooked a lot of times and the extreme examples which I think can kind of confuse students. But the funny example I think it sticks a little bit more. I mean so do the extreme examples, but since we are talking about humor.

K: So you use humor to help with their memory:

Indiana: To help with their memory and also it builds a better feeling for the class. Everything is not so dramatic or morose or serious.

Several of the professors discussed how they utilize humor to help students engage with the course material. Professor Anne Sullivan Macy feels humor can help withdrawn nursing students to be more responsive in class. If students are engaged and smiling, they are less likely to feel shy or left out in a class. When I observed one of Anne Sullivan Macy’s classes, I was very impressed with the relationship she had with her students. She is a petite woman with twinkling, kind eyes. As I entered the classroom,

the students were laughing about a story Professor Macy had told about a Chinese researcher who found a village with no colon cancer and no history of anyone living there ever having colon cancer. After an exhaustive study of the villagers, the scientist found they ate toad skins, which contained a substance preventing colon cancer. The students thought Professor Macy said “toe skin,” and they expressed revulsion. She explained she meant “venom from frog skin,” and the class was overwhelmed with laughter.

Professor Macy is very organized with several stacks of paper and medical equipment all over the room and tables. As she discussed the day’s lesson, a student asked a question: “Anne, I have a question.” The student asked how to handle a situation in a hospital regarding policies and ethics. Professor Macy explained that this could be a difficult problem. She called a student by name and asked how she would handle this problem and added, “...because you do this for a living.” Most of her students work at local clinics and hospitals. The student proceeded to explain at her hospital, she would pull out her best practices manual and show the other nurse the correct procedure. Professor Macy praised the student and noted that she said, “...at her hospital,” because different facilities have different procedures. She handled a sticky question by allowing a student to feel competent by answering the question and commended the questioning student for asking about a controversial problem.

Professor Macy demonstrated her extensive knowledge of nursing procedures in this nursing lab but also showed her keen sense of humor. At one point when they were discussing and practicing giving shots on mannequin arms, Professor Macy explained the different needle size for syringes. “Use the Goldilocks principle: not too large and not too



small.” She then led a discussion about determining the different IV lines attached to a patient. The students were relaxed and actively learning.

Professor Minerva McGonagall likes to keep her classes lively, and she wants her classes in speech to be active and rowdy. She believes humor is one way to get them involved. Engaging the students with humor is an important idea for Professor Mary Albright. If you can get their attention, it can provoke thought. They also can form attachments with the other students. She explains:

Mary: No, that’s why I say I know they are engaged. Because they are going out on their own and doing projects and I get very large, these are huge classes, and they, what’s the word I am looking for?

K: Bond? Yes. That is one of the reasons I do it. I want to bond them to me and bond with each other. And they are sitting together at tables, and I want the groups to bond. So they can study together, if they miss class share notes together, they will call. And you all don’t have those ready-made groups.

Mary: Yes, they bond together. We don’t have that. I think it is so critical, too, because they are freshmen, and they don’t have networks yet. And so we do, I have study sessions in the evening: little extra things to allow them to network and make connections and to feel comfortable.

I tell them things all the time. Like one of the things I make everybody do is I show these illusions in the sensation and perception class because it comes so early on it’s easy. There is one illusion where you have to stare at the dot and move your head like this and it makes them look like a chicken. And I get up and do it and when you do it, it makes the circle look like it is moving, so I do this and half the class won’t do it and I say come on everybody do it, nobody will look stupid and they will laugh and they will start doing it and if you still have that one guy back there who won’t do it. I say: “You’re the one who is going to look funny because you won’t fit into the crowd. I just keep teasing them until they laugh, get comfortable, and do it! I tell them, look, ask somebody, ask somebody for a study partner. Ask people if they want to study together. The worst thing they can do is tell you no and guess what? After this semester you will probably

never see them again and so, who cares? Who cares? They just get comfortable. I mean they are still so young. That first semester is just so critical. It really does. It doesn't mean that you are academically incapable, there is just so much going on. They've got to get comfortable, ask questions, engage, make connections. These things are not about the class material, but about student success. I think when you put it in a whole package the humor is a critical component.

The participants noted how humor helps them build associations with the students.

The relationship building was echoed by almost every participant. Several professors noted that using humor can help to establish rapport with students. Professor of Psychology Edna Krabappel suggested:

Edna: I think humor keeps their attention. It keeps them focused. If they see me do a few crazy things in class, it keeps them on the edge of their seats! I believe humor helps me establish rapport with students. I already said I believe developing a relationship with students is number one. That is the most important thing we can do. They will not remember all the things we teach them, but they will remember our relationship with them.

The participants also felt humor allowed the students to see them as authentic, approachable people. Speech Professor Kingsfield tells some benefits of humor for helping with the student-teacher relationship:

Charles: I am always cracking jokes in classes and using examples that the students can relate to and they loosen up by laughing. I don't teach just public speaking, as you know, but as an example that is what scares people the most. Public speaking is the most scary. So while almost any professor wants to be approachable to their students, I feel like I have to be really approachable, because they are all intimidated about having to give speeches, in front of each other and certainly if I am up here, if I am just going a good job and talking to them and telling them what they need to do, they think they have to be perfect just to get through the class, or they are never going to make it. I have to show them that I'm an easy going guy, that I have a good sense of humor and that I am approachable. So I try to get them to loosen up and show them that stuff. So you know you can go over the principles of good speech making and it hasn't

changed in you know for thousands of years. We have been studying communication for five millennia.

Another teacher, Professor Edna Krapappel uses humor to defuse potential problems. She uses humor to stop bad behavior or when students show intolerance.

Professor Indiana Jones relates how the use of humor can help control a sociology class, encourage, and build respect for the teacher and for the other students:

Indiana: Another reason to use humor is by doing it this way and people look at things differently. So they are not (long pause).

K: Different viewpoints?

Indiana: It may be something they did not like at all or thought was stupid. We do have a lot of younger students who are easily dismissive of things and we also have a lot of older students who also dismiss things, too. I think if you can counter some things with something amusing but you are still getting across the subject matter but it makes them a little bit more open to a different idea.

K: More tolerant. Yes, that's a great point.

Indiana: I'm not trying to change people's minds. I'm just trying to give you information. So that is not really the point but you are opening up to listen to what I am trying to say. Of course, but I have to tell you that you run the risk of someone saying, like I did last semester, tell me they don't like Seinfeld. They didn't like that 22 minutes or whatever, so you run that risk, too. Even though it works for 97 or 98% of the class, one person may not like it or something. But half of the class may have never seen a Seinfeld episode and they have never seen it and they say this is actually pretty funny.

Professor Charles Kingsfield reflected on his philosophy of teaching, and he believes students learn by watching their professors and modeling their behavior. He feels his students in speech classes may learn how to live their lives not just subject material from their teachers.

Charles: I think you have to have a good sense of humor. Life would not be very fun—you wouldn't be able to get through it, if you did not have a sense of humor. There are too many things that happen in life if you didn't have a sense of humor. It would flat out kill you if you didn't have a sense of humor. We have all had those experiences. If I am teaching my students communication skills, I am teaching them how to be good members of the community. I am teaching them how to relate to on another more effectively, how to get along better in the work place and how to just like themselves. All those things require a sense of humor to some degree.

K: Humor makes it easier. Good point.

Charles: Well, yeah, and I think it allows you to set down some of those things that get in your way. And if you are taking yourself too seriously, if you are not, if you don't step back once in a while and just laugh at some of the things we do and some of the stupid things we do, then I think that you are gonna get too tired and have problems interacting with other people. Whether that is a public speaking context or a group context, I am constantly trying to work that in, and there's your philosophy, as a way of saying: Look at how stupid we are. You know, here are our mistakes.

Professor of Psychology Kotter stated he believes humor is a part of life and explained:

Gabe: (Sigh). My philosophy of teaching is like a textbook answer. To see from beginning to end a progressive development of students and this development is not just acquiring knowledge, textbook or academic knowledge pertaining to the course, it's seeing them develop in terms of their ideas, in terms of their career choices, in terms of their analytical minds, their ability to reason. This is my philosophy.

K: Not just teaching psychology.

Gabe: Not just teaching psychology. And how humor fits in?

K: How does humor fit into your philosophy?

Gabe: My philosophy? Of teaching because (long pause) humor is a part of life. It is a part of the whole process. It's a natural thing. Most people enjoy laughing and smiling.

A recurring theme in their student-centered teaching philosophies was how the professors are not just teaching subject matter, but life lessons. According to Professor Dick Solomon, who teaches Psychology:

Dick: At the end of my classes I have them listen to an old CD by Murray Banks, a Jewish comedian from the 1960's. It is very dated but it is a 30 minute tape with words of wisdom and humor. The one I played yesterday was about ten things or ten ways to live with yourself and keep learning. Students have to learn to LIVE. It is a good way to end the course. On the final evaluation I give them extra credit if they can list some of the ten ways.

Professor Roy Hinkley told me when he discussed his teaching philosophy and the importance of humor that learning is important but having fun is imperative.

Roy: I think my philosophy is similar to what I've said already. Learning is number one and get the student to learn and whatever I need to do to do that. Do I need repeat things? Do I need to use multiple modes? Expression? What kinds of learning styles are in the classroom? Do I need to address all that? And humor, I guess, I keep repeating is one of those modes of interaction that helps them learn. When you are using a variety of presentation styles, that's difficult.

K: In physics and engineering isn't that difficult? Using a variety of teaching styles?

Roy: Yes and no. You know, so, you have toys and you have things you can have experience with. Hands-on experiences. You show them figures. You can draw on the board; you can do group work. You can do problems. You can do a lot of activities, but, you know, I left out part of my teaching philosophy.

K: Go back.

Roy: Fun. Fun has got to be part of my teaching philosophy. And in fact every work place I am in, I hope it is fun. And I want my students to have fun. I tell them that the first day that I want them to learn physics but I want them to have fun. And so humor is one way of having that fun.

Humor is an important technique for the participants. The professors emphasized how using humor is helpful for students. The study participants did not hesitate in listing many ways humor benefits students and the classroom climate. What about the professors themselves?

### *Benefits for Professors*

The literature about humor focuses on how students benefit from humor and the ways it improves the classroom climate, but I am particularly interested in the benefits for the professors personally. There is a great deal of research about the physical and psychological benefits of humor, but the information is focused on students and not professors. The teachers communicated the overriding idea that humor was important in their classrooms, but they were less emphatic about how humor helped them as individuals. The professors shared with me how humor kept their lecture material fresh, allowed them to have fun, made their jobs better, improved the classroom climate, and enriched their lives.

Four of the professors communicated that humor kept the material they teach “fresh.” Professor Edna Krabappel who teaches Psychology reported how she has been teaching for 30 years and humor keeps it “fresh” for her. Philosophy Professor Peter Plum detailed:

Peter: You know as well as I do that we are going to teach a certain amount of introduction classes for the rest of our existence (laughing). Over and over and over. And it's the same, well for you it's going to change a little bit especially when you get into contemporary psychology, but for me, I teach about dead white guys. It's the same dead white guys. It's Aristotle, Socrates, over and over and over and you are going to shoot yourself if you go in there and do the same lecture over and over and over. But if you let

humorous stories into your life, inform the discussion, you can keep it fresh for you. Students don't know. They think this lecture has been the same lecture all across the board. But for you, you can kind of make the jokes, and keep it fresh and not get bored as quickly.

Professor Plum stated when we smile more, we laugh more, and live longer. It is a health benefit to use humor in the classroom. Professor Indiana Jones also related how using humor made him feel happier, gave him something to look forward to in the classroom, and humor “releases nice chemicals in the brain.”

Another professor, Mary Albright, told me humor made her Psychology classes more pleasant and brightened her day. She shared that she does not teach for the money, because she could make more money in other occupations, but the gratification of teaching. Professor Krabappel stated humor makes her job fun, made her classes more pleasant, and puts her in a good mood. One of the other professors added this observation about teaching and humor, and Professor McGonagall said:

Minerva: It makes my job fun. I don't think I ever teach a class where we are not laughing at least a little bit. And there are many moments still where I walk into the class and I think: Gosh, I wish I was sick today, I am not in the mood for this, I don't want to go today.

K: Dragging.

Minerva: Yeah. I don't want to teach blah, blah, blah today. I hate that class. And I get there and I will launch my way into it and they kind of laugh, they'll go: That's kind of fun. I kind of like this! And they will get me back in the mood and I always come out of that class in a much better mood than when I went in. So they are the ones that sort of help me out.

K: They save you. That's interesting because most jobs that would not happen.

I also heard from several professors that using humor makes teaching easier and more enjoyable. Three of the teachers spoke about how humor in the classroom made them feel young. Professor Hinkley related the humor helps his students in Physics learn and makes his job better. He told me when I asked him how using humor was helpful to him:

Roy: I am going to be very practical with this answer. So my job is to teach, I want them to learn. So, if it helps them to learn, it makes my job even easier. Ok, that's number one. I mean if nothing else, it just makes it more enjoyable.

I love going to class. Especially on a day when I know something fun is coming up. We are going to laugh about something or when we are going to sing I always look forward to that day because I know it will be a hoot.

Along with making their jobs more enjoyable, Professor Indiana Jones reported he often receives email from students who remember his class and style of teaching.

K: So you are surprised when they email.

Indiana: I am happy to know that they are doing well. And they are just telling me what is going on and they have never really emailed me before. The relationship was there.

They say things like, "I really thought that you used this well." And that's the kind of thing that is really awesome. We don't really get paid a lot. We don't get, well, I am not here on an ego trip, but that is kind of cool, when you realize that quiet person who did really well in the class, but did not participate a lot, but the class was meaningful to them.

Professor Indiana Jones seems to be a teacher whom students can establish a relationship and have a friendly interaction with in the classroom. He has long hair and piercing eyes. He seems to really listen when you talk with him, and students view him as "cool" professor.



An additional reason Physics Professor Roy Hinkley listed for using humor to enhance the classroom environment was he had heard students are less likely to cheat in classes where they like and respect the professor. He also believes the students have better attendance in these classrooms. He gave another excellent rationale for using humor with students.

Roy: I think they are more willing to put up with difficult demands.

K: Really? More challenging classes?

Roy: Yeah.

K: Because you've made it enjoyable?

Roy: Yes. Because there are teachers, I am department chair, so I get to listen to the complaints that they have. OK, there are teachers who give tests and have requirements and the same demands that I put out there, but students complain and complain and complain about it.

K: (sigh)

Roy: But when they come to talk to me, I say, I do the same thing. And the only difference that I can come up with is, they enjoy the class, they appreciate, they have the relationship, and they are more willing, when I ask for more, they are willing to do it.

I could not find any research corroborating his beliefs that students cheat less, have better attendance, or will accept more challenging work from professors with strong rapport with their students, including humor. All of the participants articulated that there are some uses of humor that may not be appropriate in college classrooms. The next section will discuss this issue.

### *Appropriateness of Humor*

One other important consideration affecting classroom climate is appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor. The teachers had distinct opinions about the appropriateness of humor in their classrooms. They also identified a number of topics and behaviors they felt were not appropriate. The professors felt that humor should be avoided if it was demeaning to students, and teachers should be cautious with sensitive subjects. Some of the topics that may be sensitive for some students include sex, religion, or racial issues. Two professors voiced how curse words may cause discomfort for students and have no place in their classrooms.

According to Speech Professor Kingsfield, teachers should never pick on students. He also cautioned professors not to try to be funny if they were not good at comedy. He warned against professors using humor who have poor timing or were critical of their audience, the students. He noted that his students have stated that they hope they never make a mistake in his classes, or he will use their mistakes as examples in future classes, such as when he presents information about visual aids. He shows visual aids from former students that demonstrated humor and were examples of strong visual aids, and he also shows past projects that were not well done. He does not tell the students' names who produced the unsatisfactory visual aids.

Another professor, Mr. Kotter, felt that it is important to never embarrass students in his Psychology classes. Professor Krabappel said she would never make fun of her Psychology students and does not tease them. One professor, Sociologist Indiana Jones, reported he never belittles students, and Professor Solomon stated he would never

demean students. Almost all of the participants agreed that one inappropriate use of humor was to tease the students.

Professors also must consider how some topics may be inappropriate in their classes. Professor Mary Albright declared she was very sensitive to religion, sexuality, and prejudice with her students. Professor Kotter stated he was careful in discussing abuse, corporal punishment, and even psychological disorders. Nursing professor Anne Sullivan Macy told me no topic was off limits and yet she handled reproduction and sexuality with care and tried not to make eye contact if a student asked a very personal or embarrassing question. Professor Jones tries to be very sensitive about rape and religion, even though these are subjects he covers in his sociology classes. Similarly, Professor Minerva McGonagall is cautious with sexuality, race, gender, age, and cultural topics in her Speech courses. However, Professor McGonagall does feel pop culture notables such as Britney Spears is not off limits as students discuss culture. Paris Hilton is another celebrity Philosophy Professor Plum added to the list of celebrities to discuss because of her past behavior. He lists only one topic that is off limits in his class and that would be offensive, homophobic remarks. Professor Solomon warns professors should be cautious about any discussion regarding sexuality, schizophrenia, gender orientation, or any topic causing tension in his Psychology classroom.

One other area of appropriate and inappropriate humor involves the language we use in the classroom. Some professors voiced concerns about the use of curse words. Professor McGonagall says she is careful about cursing in her Speech classes. She told me this story about cursing in the classroom:

Minerva: We talk about language. I am very careful about language. Like I am swearing casually with you and I swear quite a bit with my friends but I don't swear in the classroom. Anything that does clear TV censors. So I might say (with voice) that these papers were crappy. But I wouldn't say these f\_\_king papers.

K: so you might say it with me?

Minerva: Right. We cover language in the workplace and one of the things I ask them: Do your teachers swear? Do you like it, do you not like it? It's a discussion and most my students say I LOVE it when teachers swear because it makes them more personable, and those are my favorite teachers. But there is always a small percentage, maybe five-ten percent, of students who say I don't like it, it makes me disrespect them, so um, which is why I don't let loose in my classes. The way I would probably want to if I didn't think I was being watched. Um. But we talk about me taking those students up to meet with the president. The president (of the Henry Ford Museum) would meet with them each semester. He used to be my educational program director before he was promoted to president. He was a fan of the program, one of the early creators. I knew him really well, and I liked him a lot. He would make time to meet with the students in my program and there were like 15 other people in this museum and the fact that he would clear his schedule to meet with eight students was pretty significant to me. I would prep them for a whole week. It was the Henry Ford Museum which was modeled after the Philadelphia Freedom Tower. So there was a huge tower, and the president's office was at the top of the tower and you couldn't get more mythical than that. It was pretty plush, and he was married to Henry Ford's great, great granddaughter. The students all knew that. The chairman of our board was a direct descendant of Henry Ford. My students were very conscious of class and culture, and they knew exactly who he was and they were very intimidated and afraid. He would always throw on the dog. And there would be drinks and food and we would dress up and we would practice our handshake and I could see them all uncomfortable sitting in these dress-up clothes and sitting at this table and he'd look at each one of them, and he'd talk to each one of them. So, tell me where you're working and what you like, and he was really good with eye contact and incredibly gifted interpersonally, and they would answer his questions and at the same point in the meeting every time he would strategically lean back in his chair, loosen his tie, and he would say: "What do you think of this fucking place, huh?" And they would go, "Who!" (using voice). And my students would laugh. He would strategically do it, and I saw him do it several semesters in a row, he would use the F word and I would ask my students: was it effective?

Was it ineffective? Why or why not. And then my students would discuss it. So that is my story about swearing in the classroom. They would find that hilarious.

Professor Indiana Jones is very conscious of what he called “salty language,” in the classroom. He discontinued the showing of a certain video because of the offensive language. In the past his classes would watch *Office Space*, but he stopped showing this movie because many of the characters used strong language that offended some of Professor Jones’ students.

Moreover, most of the professors were dismissive of humor that was demeaning to the students, and the teachers singled out several topics that may be inappropriate.

One professor offered another problem with the appropriate use of humor regarding classroom management and rapport with the students. Professor McGonagall articulated how students may misunderstand joking and bantering. She said students might receive a low grade on an assignment and question her with statements like: “I thought you liked me,” and “I thought we were friends.” Students may confuse academic evaluations with their light-hearted relationship with the professor. She has learned to help them to be mature, realistic about her friendship with them, and be more firm.

The second finding of this study focused on how the professors were very student centered in their classrooms. They used humor to improve the classroom climate and could identify a number of benefits for students and, after some reflection, could list some personal advantages. The teachers communicated the overriding idea that humor is a personal strategy, and they had to be cautious in using appropriate humor and not belittle their students, be careful in their discussion topics, and mindful of their use of

sensitive language. The third finding explores the performance side of humor in the classroom.

### Teaching as Performance

The most unexpected finding of this study for me was the aspect regarding teaching as performance. Using a thematic analysis of the interviews, I attempted to identify categories of words or phrases to represent different topics. Using the participants' language and their own words, I grouped together the most frequently occurring keywords and patterns. One surprising category emerged during the evaluation of the words: performance. Several professors identified their classes as "the audience," their learning tools as "props," and their behaviors as "just like a stand-up comedian."

The professors I interviewed showed great clarity about how and why they used humor in the classroom. Although a few professors had early success in their teaching, all of them expressed the idea they had grown and developed their own style of teaching. Through experimentation and even some failures, the professors had evolved and were all comfortable in their mode of presenting information and interacting with their students. Several of the professors expressed how they view their teaching style as dramatic and expressive.

Teaching as performance was a theme mentioned by several of the professors in my interviews. According to Professor Dick Solomon, he was very shy and hesitant to get up in front of classes when he first began teaching Psychology. He felt he knew the material, but he was very nervous. He would practice and practice his lectures in front of his wife. He would rehearse voices and expressions for his presentations the way his mentor

professor had done. He watched famous comedians like Johnny Carson and would practice his timing and pacing for jokes and stories. He read Bennett Cerf joke books. Today he still searches for videos and funny stories to share with his classes.

Likewise, Nursing Professor Anne Sullivan Macy admitted one of her favorite classes in college was a speech class. She approached each speech by pretending she was an actress in a play. For every speech she developed a character who would say the lines. She said she was “petrified,” and this was the only way she could present each speech. She used this same approach when she began teaching. She would learn her “lines” for each lesson. Rehearsal is a key component for performance.

Teaching as performance can also aid in the development of the teaching identity. Both Professor Solomon and Macy felt their confidence grew as they were successful in the classroom. They rehearsed and performed and become stronger, more courageous teachers. They both identified themselves as introverts and reported teaching was difficult for them in their early years of teaching.

Another aspect of teaching as performance was mentioned by several professors. Physics Professor Hinkley and Psychology Professor Edna Krabappel both commented how they often used “props” in their classes to contribute to learning. Professor Hinkley described several learning aids he uses, and he described them as his “toys” for physics and engineering classes. Professor Krabappel explained how she uses hats in class. She even has eyeglasses with windshield wipers on them for one lesson. She insisted it is important to “set the stage for humor.” She felt effective humor must be linked directly to

the material and not just to make professors popular with the students. Professor Mary Albright also told me she uses a number of learning props in Psychology.

Additional examples using role-play and props were given by Professor Minerva McGonagall in her Speech classes:

Minerva: And I show them a video montage of some stupid soap opera, and they are looking at me like Why did we watch this? And I say wasn't that acting horrible? Was it terrible? Over the top? Ridiculous? That's what you get to do. Then I give them cards, and they'll get a particular relationship model. You need to describe a certain aspect of this model using a very bad, horribly acted, over the top soap opera skit. And here's props and dump out a whole bag of hats and fake swords and cheesy mustaches, and it puts about three or four people in the class in a horrible place, and they have a look on their faces like: This is horrible. Why did I come today? And I feel for them because I personally don't think I would enjoy that. But they end up, even if they don't enjoy their own skit, they enjoy everybody else's skit. So I make them be the fools for the day. Just for the laughs. And they remember the relationship models.

Professor McGonagall was a theater-performance major in college and planned to be an actress before discovering her calling as a teacher. She mentioned to me several times during our interview how she enjoys the "highs" she receives from her classes. Teaching is very gratifying to her, and in her early teaching she felt as if she was performing in front of an audience. Professor Kotter also uses role-play in classes to allow the students to become connected and linked to the content in Psychology.

Three of the professors were concerned that other professors would not perform humor well in the classroom. Sociology Professor Indiana Jones was concerned if professors used humor too much, education would seem more like a show than learning. He told me:

Indiana: I think it (humor) helps. I think it can be distracting if you do it too much. If it always like slapstick time and comedy hour, I don't think



that's helping.

K: I don't think I know anybody who uses it too much, but...

Indiana: I don't think I know anybody who uses it too much here, but I have known people at other places that wanted to be popular or well liked, so they just feed into that so it becomes a more of a show than instruction.

Other professors were concerned if professors did not "deliver" humor in a professional manner. Professor Charles Kingsfield, who teaches Speech and Communications courses, was concerned about using humor in the classroom, and how it can be very harmful if teachers do not execute well. He shared this idea with me:

Charles: It can be negative as I said if you are not using it appropriate or if you are not funny, first of all. If you don't use proper timing or if you use it against the audience, these are all things we teach in our class, anyway for public speaking. If you turn in on your audience, they are not going to like it very much, but if you are using it properly it can highlight, it can make for real, it can help people to remember. I think that is the positive.

One more example of how teaching could be related to performance was revealed as several professors talked about feeling like a stand-up comedian. Professor Peter Plum stated he often feels like a comedian when he banters with his students and quickly responds to their comments. Professor Edna Krabappel maintained how humor seems to run in her family, and everyone has a great sense of humor. She stated one brother could be a standup comedian, and another brother is a great story teller. Her four-year-old niece is already displaying the family trait of humor. Professor Kingsfield told me he tells students to show their own personalities as they present speeches in his class, because he often laughs and has fun in his classes. This fast-talking professor tells personal stories so professionally and relates them to communication issues so well that he could be a paid

comedian. Another professor, Minerva McGonagall, feels she could make more money in Hollywood as a comedian, but she wants to be a Psychology teacher. She really enjoys being a professor.

Professor Anne Sullivan Macy told me a story when she was asked to make a presentation at a conference about nutrition, and she enlisted other faculty members, and they dressed up as the Nutri-Sisters. They dressed in all black, wore dark glasses, and sang songs like Cheeseburger in Paradise by Jimmy Buffett. The session was so popular, they were asked to repeat it.

Another teacher, Professor Peter Plum, seems to have a unique, creative style of engaging his students in his classes. As a philosophy teacher he explained to me how most high schools do not have philosophy, and many students enter his class without any prior knowledge of his discipline. During a class observation of Professor Plum, I watched him interact with his students. Professor Plum was team teaching with another professor, and the class was discussing the advantages and disadvantages of social networking, such as Facebook, Fubar, and MySpace. There were three students who were sitting together, and the three had not commented during a discussion lasting over one hour. Professor Plum walked over to one of the students and said, “What do you think, Maria?” When she answered, he laughed heartily and said, in response to her comment: “Do we have stalkers online? Do we have E-thugging?” (Using a deep voice): “Where’s the badass now?” He has a dramatic style and laughs frequently with the fellow teacher and with the students. He then tried to engage the other two students by calling them by name and asking their opinions, too. He was wearing shorts, a red t-shirt, and sneakers

and his fast talking style kept the class discussion lively. They seemed to respond to his entertaining style. He engaged them very much the way a stand-up comedian would chat with an audience.

During the second day of a class this semester a student asked me if I was a drama major in college. I laughed and said I was a psychology and sociology major, and why did she ask? She replied that I was so dramatic and expressive that she assumed I was a theater major. Teaching as performance was an interesting finding in this study.

### *The Discrepant Case*

As I interviewed each professor about their use of humor, I felt it was important to allow them to share their experiences and beliefs without judgment. I asked them questions and listened to their stories with an open mind. However, as I began to focus on the findings of this study, one participant's responses were unusual. During the interview and class observation, he provided some good examples and comments, but a few stories he told me were disconcerting.

I considered excluding his comments in this study, but I also felt it was important to illustrate the significant differences there can be in what is "acceptable" in the classroom. Professor Peter Plum was referred to me by two individuals. One recommendation came from the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at his college, and the other referral was from a director of a Center for Teaching Excellence at a nearby college who was familiar with his teaching style. I heard Professor Plum present an excellent speech at a conference; he is an outstanding speaker. With these recommendations and my own

positive experience of him, I was expecting a very different professor from the one I found.

His disclosures were often shocking to me. One example was when he discussed how he interacts with students in his classes. The other nine participants stressed how they try not to demean or tease the students. Professor Plum disagreed with the other professors when he told me that he can make fun of students and the students could make fun of him, but he did not allow the students to make fun of each other. He felt he could moderate how students tease him, and he could control how the dynamics of how a class would react. He gave this as an example of his humor in his Philosophy class:

Peter: In the spring mini-mester I had a student who was Pakistani, and he had a long name, and he goes by Ali, you know, because he had this very long name. And I said: "Ali, do you go by that name because you worry that people think you have a terrorist name if you don't?" And he agreed and we talked about that, and the joke was: "Oh, you know Ali, he's the terrorist."

K: Oh, my gosh. Now that's surprising.

Peter: And you have to be very careful and get the trust of the students, but as well, I think what happens is, and what I found what happens quite often and what makes me distrust humans to a degree is, no one is offended, no one mentions anything until something doesn't go the student's way and then: you know--he said this and this and this. And he did this and this and this and it is taken out of context. No humor is injected into it, and if you kind of deadpan all of this, I mean, it sounds horrible.

K: That's true. If you write it down, you weren't there and second hand, yes. It is worse. (Gasp).

Peter: That's exactly right. Of course, all of that is the written word. It is different when you speak it out loud. If you read that in a court of law, you know, he said: "Ali, was a terrorist." I'm a racist, at that point. And so that's why I was interested by your topic humor and topics like that, that I think, topics I believe, philosophy has to discuss. Inherently

dangerous, in a situation where people feel completely ok with being able to judge your performance from outside the classroom given third hand information.

Professor Plum told me he has to have a meeting with a disgruntled student about one time each semester. He said some students do not understand his use of humor. He seemed completely unaware that his behavior was problematic in any way. He also stated he receives good evaluations from his students and his academic dean.

Professor Plum feels that humor helps the students learn to trust him so he can discuss controversial topics. He feels he must earn the students' trust, so he can discuss difficult topics and he described one example:

Peter: But for humanities classes and especially for human sexuality, how do you go into human sexuality and keep a straight face?

K: People say their subject is a serious topic! That's what people tell me. They say: You should not laugh. Listen, you would not believe the people who have told me that.

Peter: They have serious points. I don't mean you should walk in there and say: I know a girl who had syphilis. That's not funny. That's what I mean, you have to be careful. I have learned that until you build trust, the students don't know how to take you. Let me give you a case in point. It is illegal in the state of Texas to ride in the back of a truck if you are under the age of 18. That law as I see it, and it is not enforced, not enforced because no one's lawn would get mowed. That's horrible to say, but no one's lawn would get mowed because of that law. I don't think it is right. I don't think it is appropriate, but I have seen many, what look to be many, Hispanics who look to be underage, Hispanic people, newly immigrant, trying to earn a dollar and improve their lives.

If I bring that up on day one, students don't know where I am going and probably think it's racist. They just don't know where I'm going. If I bring that up on week three, the people who will most agree with me are Hispanic students. I say, you know as well as I do, that if that was Paris Hilton that flew out of the back of a truck and died, that law would be enforced tomorrow. Right? It is not enforced, and it is because

no one seems to care when Hispanics fly out of the back of trucks. Now that sounds brutal but that is the reality. We say they like cheap clothing, and they do not give a blank about the kid that earned 18 cents that day making that clothing. So I tell my students, when you put on your shirts, take a deep smell, because it smells like blood. The blood of children.

Am I getting through? Yes. Am I using humor? Yes. But they have to trust me to see where I'm making my points.

These two stories, one about calling a student a terrorist and one about Hispanics flying out the back of a truck, are disturbing. Although Professor Plum feels he can make statements that are alarming, because the students "trust" him, I feel it is risky to shock students in this way. These accounts expressed in a humorous way are socially unacceptable. Professors who use humor in this way may feel a need to feel superior to their students. A teacher may focus on the imbalance of power in the classroom and may relish the role as an expert. Students may feel unable to challenge his comments because of the imbalance of power.

Professor Plum told me he discusses almost all topics, even personal experiences. One student told his class she had taken drugs to commit suicide, and he told me he used humor to defuse the situation.

Peter: I had a student spring semester who I loved and I dearly do, and I hope we can keep together. But she said during the semester that she took a shit load of sleeping pills and tried to kill herself at one point. And that is where the ability to use humor and I build trust. So after a while they trust and say anything. She said: "I tried to kill myself, and I had evidence." We were talking about evidence, and she said, "I have evidence that there is no afterlife is when I woke up I don't remember anything. It was just black. It was a near death experience. I did not see Jesus. God did not show up." And she is just reeling at this point. And I said out loud after she said it, and I know Mary, her name was Mary, and I said: "Mary, when you took all those sleeping pills did you say to yourself after you woke up, "Damn, I can't even do that right!"?

K: Wow. Oh my gosh.

Peter: She said: “That’s exactly what I said.” And we all started laughing, and she got back after the story and I took a situation where we were talking about someone killing themselves very serious, and we could go cut to commercial, and I don’t want that heavy moment weighing on you. I don’t want that heavy moment to weigh on you. I’m not ready to handle that depth at 18 or 19 or that maturity level. So, I make a quick joke, she laughs, I laugh, we’re all friends here, we’ve all done stupid things and can you tell me a little bit more about what you mean.

This is an example of one story that concerned me about his use of humor. A student shares a story about a suicide attempt, and he makes a joke. This was an instance of an inappropriate use of humor. However, Professor Plum is very confident about his relationship with his students. As a counselor, I am concerned about the student telling this personal and significant story about a suicide attempt, and Professor Plum only responding with a callous comment to relieve tension in the classroom. He shared with me that he likes this student very much, but his response was very belittling to the student. He felt the need to make a “quick joke” and make everyone laugh. This could be a very aggressive use of humor. I don’t feel he intended to inflict harm to the student, but by dismissing an attempted suicide, he conveyed very little compassion and a misunderstanding of the purpose of the story. She may have been seeking help. By making a joke about the pain of this student, he showed no sympathy and shielded himself and the students from the emotional distress she was sharing. Again, he was demonstrating a superior and disparaging attitude toward the students in his classroom. Even playful aggression does not belong in the college classroom.

Professor Plum also seemed to disagree with the other participants about the use of curse words. He told me he would sometimes use the “N word” and other offensive

words, but only after gaining the students' trust. Professor Plum shared this account of his behavior:

Peter: Now the other students know that I give a shit. He's paying attention. So that I think that when I do go kind of overboard with them, when they could be offended, they go: "You know what, this guy really does care, I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt. I am going to let this guy run and see where he goes."

K: How far will he go?

Peter: So if they stop me. I'll tell you what else I have learned. If do use the N word, if you are doing a different dissertation on racial comments in the classroom, and we are doing a three part series this fall that I am going to moderate on controversies and race in the classroom, and how and if it should be approached. If you walk in on day one, and one white male says, "Nigger." All the baggage from all of those students, from that word.

K: All their bad experiences.

Peter: From that one word. It took an African American student saying to me, "You know you used the N word 30 minutes ago, and I haven't heard a single word you have said in 30 minutes. I am thinking about all the baggage that comes along with that."

So if I walk in, and say no one cares about if Hispanics go flying in the back of a truck, I won't make a point in the next 15 minutes that is really salient. If they think I say something really racist, they just lock up. They are still back there 30 minutes ago, so you've got to have that empathy, and you've got to build that trust. So they'll go: he did just use the N word, but he has done stuff like that before. And I've been safe, so I am going to see where he goes.

K: That's such a big learning leap there.

Peter: We have been talking language in the classroom, and we were talking about Lichtenstein. And I was using the N word as an example, and one of my students said: It was a great topic and he was a Jamaican immigrant who was convinced that the N word should never be used. Get it out of the dictionary! Which is great. Good for her! And the other student said, and he was born in third



ward Houston, and he said: “I probably use the N word 50 times a day. Never derogatory. I say: “What’s up, Nigger? Hey, what’s going on, Nigger?”

K: With friends.

Peter: Right, so they then had the discussion in class, and at the end of that discussion I said: “Can you believe we just had a discussion about the N word, and no one got in a fist fight, and no one shot each other? People will bond in this class and then after that, abortion is not out the window, and everything like that, and we can talk about these topics, and as long as I moderate, moderate with humor, everyone gets made fun of equally, including me. Equal opportunity hater. I hate everybody equally. Everybody gets the brunt.

This story highlights more than just the use of curse words. Freud (1905) discussed how one of the functions of humor was the release of aggressive or sexual drives. The pleasure of humor would be experienced by using bad language and feeling naughty and allowing him to regress to childish behavior. This teacher may enjoy the surprise students show when he uses scandalous language or stories.

Professor Plum also believes he treats everyone equally with his outrageous behavior. There is an imbalance of power in the classroom, and students are unable to tease him “equally.” He describes himself as an “equal opportunity hater.” Freud (1928) would describe this as using humor as a defense mechanism. When we feel overwhelmed by an unpleasant situation, we use humor to relieve the anxiety. Professor Plum may sense students feel uncomfortable with a topic or conversation, so he seeks to be in control and use humor to feel superior. His anxious ego may try to regain control of a situation. He makes excuses for his repressed impulses to shock his students by claiming this behavior bonds them to him. I believe students are intrigued by a professor who

astonishes them with offensive language and stories, but he displays a disturbing pattern of behavior with very negative connotations.

One important concept that is highlighted by Professor Plum's behavior is how humor is not a unitary concept. There are individual differences in the frequency, ability to comprehend, and appreciation of various kinds of humorous stimuli. Research findings that relate to the development of one of these areas regarding a sense of humor may not apply to others. Humor is individually and socially constructed. It is difficult to define or explain "what is funny." Understanding what is acceptable in an educational culture is a very important factor in determining to what degree a professor can be productive and effective.

Professor Plum is very confident and self assured about his use of humor. However, for this study, I am placing his controversial comments in this section. I recognize there are huge differences in the ways professors can use humor, but Professor Plum's comments are often insensitive and demeaning. Humor can be inappropriate at certain times and with certain students. Professor Peter Plum is convinced that he sets an atmosphere of trust and is able to use very unorthodox practices in the learning process, yet he does exactly the opposite. His case is an example of the dark side of humor in the classroom. If the instructor is as insensitive and callous as Professor Plum, humor can be an instrument of harm. His use of humor does not seem to be a positive example of intentional humor in the classroom.

### Summary of Findings

The college professors in this study were deliberate and very intentional in their use of humor in their classrooms. As a group, the teachers use humor in many different ways, but they believe humor is very important for their classroom climate and for their lives. Three overarching findings emerged from this study.

The first finding revealed that humor helped shape the professors' teaching identity. Some of the participants prepared to be teachers while others did not. The teachers articulated that by implementing humor in their classrooms, they have been definitely affected in many positive ways. Humor helped some of the teachers develop confidence and even courage them to try new techniques. All of the participants modeled their teaching behaviors on their teaching mentors. These significant teachers influenced the participants, and the mentors seemed to use humor very effectively in their classrooms. The participants believe new teachers should be comfortable in their use of humor. The professors verbalized the idea that humor was essential to their teaching. Development of their teaching identity through humor is crucial for these teachers, because they believe that humor is a large part of their personalities. These professors were very creative in the variety of ways they use humor with their students. The professors stress they believe education should be fun.

The second finding of this study is that the professors I interviewed were extremely student-centered. In the interviews with the participants they strongly affirmed many benefits for students when humor is used in the classroom. The professors insisted that humor helps to relax students and allowed them to make connections between each other

and the teacher. Humor helps the students to remember information, and the professors explained that humor can help to engage their students. The professors believe that humor can help to defuse problems and help students to become more tolerant. Humor helps students to learn about life.

Another aspect of this finding involved the benefits for faculty. At first, the participants had some difficulty in considering this aspect of humor because they were so focused on the advantages for students. However, they listed several ways humor is helpful for them individually. Humor helps keep their teaching subjects fresh and fun. When professors use humor, it can improve the classroom climate and make their jobs more enjoyable. One professor stated she believed humor kept her feeling young. One other consideration in this finding was the appropriateness of humor in the classroom. The professors strongly voiced the belief that professors should not belittle or tease students. The participants were cautious in using humor with certain topics, and they were also careful about using appropriate language.

One professor was discussed in a separate section of the study because of his unusual behavior and teaching practices. He is a discrepant case in this study because his use of humor in his teaching was insensitive and even hurtful. He shows the dangers that humor presents when it is in the wrong hands. In fact, his misuse of humor underscores the importance of the thoughtfulness, care, and sensitivity demonstrated by all the other professors in this study in how they used humor in their classrooms.

## CHAPTER V

## DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

*Then I commended mirth, because a person hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry.*

---*Ecclesiastes 8:15*

## Discussion

Humor is all around us. Movies and television programs feature comedy more often than any other type of entertainment (Boverie, Hoffman, Klein, McClelland, & Oldknow, 1994). We are flattered when people laugh at our jokes, and we want to spend time with people who are fun. How does humor fit into college teaching? “Humor is a major force and [a] needed one for dealing with the real world. The real world is filled with humor but is often excluded from the world of learning and teaching” (Civikly, 1986, p. 64).

This study presents a picture of college professors who intentionally use humor in their college classrooms. They teach a variety of subjects including psychology, speech and communication, nursing, sociology, physics and engineering, and philosophy. Their academic and personal backgrounds are very different, and they utilize a variety of teaching methods and styles to facilitate their students’ learning.

The college professors I interviewed believe humor is an important part of their teaching. The use of humor is an important aspect of their teaching identities, and these professors were able to be reflective of their inner selves. In these interviews, I frequently heard how humor results in positive outcomes for the teacher and the students.

The professors interviewed are successful, outstanding teachers. They were nominated by experts for this study, are well respected, and are very student-centered. They are knowledgeable about their disciplines and aware of many different teaching techniques. Teaching is a complicated behavior and sometimes the experiences do not fall into tidy categories. It is difficult to separate a person from his/her sense of humor or professors from their devotion to their students and their subjects.

Three overarching findings regarding the use of humor in the classroom emerged from this study: 1) The professors use humor because it is a part of their teaching identities, and humor is embedded into their individual personalities, 2) The professors are strong proponents of learner-centered classrooms and use many techniques including humor in their student-centered classrooms, and 3) The professors view teaching as performance, and humor is an important component in their repertoire. The professors interviewed had very distinct opinions about how humor influenced them, their students, and the classroom climate. In this chapter, I will discuss the study findings in light of the relevant literature. I will also discuss the role gender played in this study. The conclusions section will present my personal reflections, insights, and analysis regarding the findings of the study. In the final section, I will offer recommendations for further research.

### *Teaching Identity and Personality*

An important finding in this study conveyed the importance of self knowledge and awareness of a teacher's own identity to join self, subject, and students in the classroom (Palmer, 1998). The participants frequently confirmed how an understanding of

one's comfort level and personality would define their behavior in the classroom, how they interact with students, and the techniques which felt natural to them.

Identity and teaching identity were frequent topics in this study. Palmer (1998) described identity as:

...an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic makeup, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others and to myself, the experience of love and suffering—and much, much more (p. 13).

Palmer (1998) also states: "...we teach who we are" (p. 2). The participants I interviewed frequently referred to their personalities, relationships, and beliefs in our interviews. The professors outlined how significant teachers shaped their view of teaching, how humor was essential to their teaching and a major part of their teaching philosophies, how humor is a part of their lives, how their classrooms reflect who they are, and how using humor connects them with their students. These reasons parallel the work of Palmer (1998) who calls upon teachers to be their authentic selves and listen to the voices within to understand our need for integrity and wholeness in our lives.

How do we develop a teaching identity? According to Eble and McKeachie (1986) growing as a teacher involves enlarging the faculty member's knowledge of learning theory and practices, increasing the professor's interest and commitment in teaching, reinforcing and rewarding excellent teaching, and providing professional development opportunities. There does not seem to be a blueprint for teachers to develop their teaching

identities. Successful teachers have developed their own styles of teaching, usually based on their own experiences, influential teachers, and their own personal skills.

Some of the teachers had trained to be teachers and some were “called” later to teach. The interviews revealed some professors had early success in their classrooms, and some struggled at first to be successful. All of the professors had supportive role models, and the teachers I interviewed wanted to emulate their mentors.

Every professor mentioned how each of their mentors was fun in the classroom and used humor effectively. As they developed their teaching identities, they endeavored to emulate their role models.

New faculty often struggle with balancing the responsibilities of performance in the classroom, research, funding, and committee assignments (Sorcinelli, 1995). Colleges and universities assume if you are knowledgeable in your field, you have the abilities to teach the discipline (Angelo, 1994). Developing your teaching identity and personal teaching style is a difficult task. As the participants told me their stories about their classrooms, it has helped me to understand one aspect of their lives. The professors described their behavior regarding humor, and it reflects their beliefs and values. Rossiter and Clark (2007) explain how narratives allow us to see the self not as a fixed identity that moves through the lifespan but a cluster of multi-dimensional stories. “The self is nonunitary in the sense that there is no single, core self that exists separate and unaffected by its sociocultural context” (Clark, 2001). I believe the participants’ teaching identities are shaped by their individual personalities. An important dimension of the professors’ teaching identities is the belief in experiencing joy in their lives and using their sense of



humor in a positive way in the college classroom. I felt I could see a glimpse of the teaching identities of these professors through the stories and narratives they shared with me. I learned about how they are making sense of their worlds and how their personalities and identities have been shaped by their students.

Professional identity development is not complete when we sign a teaching contract. There is more than just a mastery of techniques and knowledge involved in teaching (Holberg & Taylor, 2007). Development of the teaching identity is a complex process involving an understanding of our values and beliefs and growing through a teacher-as-learner process. Truly reflective teachers are constantly questioning, challenging, and discussing their practices (Stenberg, 2005). The professors I interviewed are excellent teachers and yet are still growing and changing their teaching identities. They were eager to discuss their teaching practices and philosophies, but all of the professors displayed an ardent desire to continue to learn. They frequently asked me about humor research and wanted more information to develop their skills in presentation. The teachers I interviewed value learning and are continuing to grow and change. They are open to new experiences and learning.

In the descriptions of the methods the participants used for humor also reflected their teaching identities. One of the professors who is an introvert outside the classroom frequently “dresses” for classes in costumes. This may be seen as very dramatic, but it also another way to hide her shy personality. Her outfits are a way of shielding her personality, and she can take major risks in her humor, because it really isn’t “her,” but a character memorizing her “lines.”

### *Student-Centered Professors*

Another finding is based on the teaching philosophies promoted by the participants of a student-centered classroom. The culture of a student-centered classroom is focused on a clear vision of good teaching and learning, and the professors I interviewed came shining through in their strong belief in learner-centered instruction. As college professors prepare themselves to teach their first class, their focus is usually on what the teacher does rather than on what the students do or what they are supposed to learn. We are considered content specialists, and many professors plan to transmit knowledge to their students. Today outstanding teachers realize that knowledge is constructed, not received. The art and science of teaching involves doing many things to encourage students to learn (Bain, 2004).

One description of an effective teacher is one who successfully organizes a classroom, implements instruction, and monitors student progress (Stronge, 2002). However, today's successful and effective college professors are outstanding scholars in their fields and are excellent teachers who inspire and influence their students through active learning in a critical learning environment (Bain, 2004). There does not seem to be a causal link between humor and learning in the literature. The research foundation basis for humor in the classroom starts with the idea that laughter can serve as an attention getter, stimulate discussion, break tension, and develop social relationships (Provine, 2000). Humor can be one way to develop a positive learning environment. Classroom climate can be defined as "the atmosphere or mood in which interactions between teacher and students take place. Classroom climate will determine the manner and degree to

which a teacher will exercise authority, show warmth and support and allow for independent judgment and choice” (Borich, 1988, p. 277).

Teaching is a very personal activity, and we should encourage and embrace those individuals who are comfortable with their own identities and recognize their strengths to develop classroom behaviors that increase learning. One of the behavioral characteristics of creative leaders or teachers is: “Creative leaders highly value individuality. They sense that people perform at a higher level when they are operating on the basis of their unique strengths, talents, interests, and goals than when they are trying to conform to some imposed stereotype” ( Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Using humor in the classroom is one way to be creative as a teacher. During the interviews and observations, I learned about many methods to use humor.

The techniques the participants shared with me to utilize humor in the classroom were innovative and creative. Reading books or articles about teaching methods would list many of the ideas and activities they described to me, but there were also many very personal stories and original forms of humor. The professors were very student-centered and were most interested in helping students learn information.

One prevailing message communicated was humor should be tied to content. It takes a great deal of effort to coordinate learning activities using humor rather than just lecturing. Although the professors often modeled their own teaching style from their mentors, they frequently mentioned creative ideas they had developed personally to teach a subject. The methods they used reflected their identities. They used techniques they were comfortable utilizing. When I asked them about what advice they would give to

new teachers about the use of humor, several of the professors advocated being true to their own sense of style, their own teaching identity, and their own sense of humor.

The professors also discussed appropriate and inappropriate humor in the classroom. Except for the discrepant professor, all of the other professors were very much in agreement about their use of humor. They did not want to demean or tease students. They try to be respectful about sensitive topics and language. Two of the professors admitted using “salty” language outside the classroom, but they were careful not to use curse words in front of students. In my insular way of thinking, I assumed all professors thought this way. However, the discrepant professor feels using profanity is reflective of the real world. He teases students and feels it is acceptable and helps to connect the students to him. This is an indication of his sense of humor. His use of power because of his position as a professor is disturbing. He told me he has conflicts with students who do not earn high grades, and they complain to the administration about his comments. He feels if his words are taken out of context, they can seem to be unfeeling and tactless. In an almost two hour interview he told me three stories where I felt his responses were insensitive. During a class observation, I saw him often making jokes and making comments to the students, and he can be very humorous and engaging. He can also be inconsiderate.

One remarkable epiphany came during the interviews when I realized that each of the professors believed that humor was essential to their teaching. Most of the participants verbalized how they could not teach without using humor, and the other professors articulated they would be devious and use humor in a sneaky manner. I know

that humor is important to me and my teaching, but I was still unprepared for the level of significance the ten professors attributed to humor. The professors in this study felt humor defined their teaching. It was not just a method. Their identities depended on the use of humor. A few of the teachers also stated they wanted to convey to students how important humor was to their lives. They wanted students to understand having joy and laughter is crucial in life.

When I questioned the professors about why they employed humor, they were very cognizant of the reasons and benefits for students. They were very aware of how humor could improve classroom climate. Every professor conceded humor was essential for their teaching. Their methods and explanations all pointed to the importance of a student centered or learner centered classroom. MacKeracher (1996) defines the student-centered approach as: “The learner centered approach focuses primarily on the learner and the learning process, and secondarily on those who help the learner learn” (p. 2).

The professors were focused on the student, not the class, and the learning, not the just the content. This approach is very effective with adult learners. There does not seem to be a causal link between humor and learning in the literature. The research foundation basis for humor in the classroom starts with the idea that laughter can serve as an attention getter, stimulate discussion, break tension, and develop social relationships (Provine, 2000). Humor can be one way to develop a positive learning environment. Classroom climate can be defined as “the atmosphere or mood in which interactions between teacher and students take place. Classroom climate will determine the manner

and degree to which a teacher will exercise authority, show warmth and support and allow for independent judgment and choice (Borich, 1988, p. 277).

The professors I interviewed discussed how humor can be helpful in all of these ways to improve learning. They also mentioned ways I could not confirm in the literature including how students who respected and connected with professors were less likely to cheat, had better attendance, and could be given more demanding work. They felt using humor allowed them to tackle challenging topics and defuse difficult situations.

A major finding of this study is the development of the participant's sense of teaching identity. I wanted to understand why they used humor for their own individual benefit. When I questioned these very intelligent and reflective instructors about the benefits of humor for them personally, they were surprised and silent at first. I believe they are so student-centered, they were more concerned about how students are influenced by humor than their own rewards. After some thought, they responded with a few advantages. Several of the teachers told me they used humor to improve the classroom climate, to help the students learn, and to make their jobs easier. There were several comments about how using humor kept the content "fresh" for them. Some professors admitted that using humor improved their moods by putting a smile on his/her face, brightening their dispositions, and making them happier. Most of them also told me using humor was important because they liked to have fun. Pleasant experiences in the classroom were reported to make them feel young, energetic, and focused. As they discussed these personal benefits, they seemed almost embarrassed. They were student centered. I discussed in the first chapter of this paper the psychological and psychological

benefits of humor, and I did not expect a professor to tell me they used humor to lower their blood pressure or to elevate their levels of salivary immunoglobulin A. However, I do not think most people understand or appreciate the many reasons humor is beneficial to their lives.

This research also revealed another topic that I would like to briefly discuss in this chapter: gender differences regarding various aspects of humor.

### *Gender Differences*

As I was conceptualizing this study, I began to ask my colleagues to suggest excellent teachers who intentionally use humor in the classroom. During my dissertation proposal meeting, I shared with my committee that I had four possible candidates, and then I realized: the potential participants were all men. Following the suggestion of my committee, I began to search for an equal number of women. I called ten Centers of Teaching Excellence at local colleges and universities. Seven of the Center directors contacted me by email or by phone. All seven suggested men at first. When I pressed them for women professors, all of the directors hesitated. Some offered to call me back when they had more time to consider my requirements of five years of teaching, excellent professors, and women teachers who intentionally used humor in the classroom. I continued to ask my friends, colleagues, and students for potential participants. When I would call the candidates, several admitted they did not intentionally use humor, and they admitted they were “funny” people and were spontaneously funny with students. There were significantly more men suggested to me than women professors. I also asked the

participants for suggestions. When I had finished the interviews, I still had the names of 18 male professors and only three women professors to contact.

When I decided to use the names of famous teachers for my participants' pseudonyms, I had difficulty coming up with names of women teachers. I considered movies, books, television programs, and actual teachers who were living or deceased. Again, I labored to find women's names. Some of the women teachers suggested to me were Etta Place, the Sundance Kid's girlfriend; Katharine Lee Bates, Wellesley English professor and writer of "America the Beautiful;" Peace Pilgrim, teacher and peace prophet; Shana Alexander, teacher and television personality; and Miss Jean Brodie, a fictional teacher who engaged in some questionable behavior. Why were men more frequently proposed? Where were the women? I consider myself a feminist, but even I was surprised to encounter the power of patriarchy as I conducted this study.

As I struggled to find qualified women participants, I also began to research the gender differences in humor, and I included the major pieces of this literature in Chapter II. There are differences in how men and women appreciate humor. For example, one study in humor reported that men are more likely to joke, tease, and produce humor, and women are more likely to laugh (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 1998). Men are more likely to laugh about aggressive and sexual humor, and women respond more to nonsense humor (Groch, 1974). Both men and women enjoy jokes making fun of women than those that target men (Cantor, 1976). In a study by Martin and Kuiper (1999), four categories of humor were studied in daily logs kept by a large number of men and women. Men and women did not differ in overall frequency of reported laughter, canned jokes, or recall of



humorous past events. However, women were significantly more likely to report laughing in response to social situations than men.

There are gender differences in the functions of humor for males and females in social interactions. According to Deborah Tannen (1986), women use laughter for intimacy in friendly conversation, and men use laughter for positive self-presentation. Tannen found women use humor to enhance group solidarity through self disclosure, and men use humor to impress others and to develop a positive identity. There seems to be a gender difference in social goals and the use of humor as a mode of communication. If humor is used to establish meaningful relationships and resolve conflicts, an individual benefits in a specific manner. If someone wants to gain an advantage or dominate others, humor can be a useful skill.

The relevance of the appreciation and functions of humor may be very meaningful in the difficulty I experienced in trying to find women professors who intentionally used humor in their classrooms. Perhaps male and female professors use humor for different reasons in the classroom, but there did not seem to be any differences between the benefits listed by the study participants listing the benefits for students or the benefits for professors. One study found negligible differences between male and female uses of positive styles of humor such as affiliative and self-enhancing humor (Crawford & Gressley, 1991). Affiliative humor is defined as the tendency to tell jokes, make funny comments, use witty banter, and other humorous behavior to reduce tension and improve relationships. The study reported males tend to use negative forms of humor which emphasize aggressive or self-defeating humor.

Humor production is another question that seemed to emerge in this discussion. Does this ability or characteristic for using humor as performance in teaching develop when these professors are children? McGhee (1979) has completed a longitudinal study of the development of a sense of humor in childhood. Individual differences in humor seem to emerge very early. Parents do not have to teach children to appreciate humor or play. Does parental behavior or family environment contribute to humor development? Does a happy childhood or a childhood filled with conflict and distress increase or decrease the development of performance humor? Are humorists born or developed? Why do some people become professional comedians, and do they have different personality characteristics than other professions? A sense of humor is not a unitary concept, and there are many individual variances.

Paul McGhee (1980) found early maternal behavior seemed to have an important bearing on children with a heightened sense of humor. In preschooler boys and girls displaying strong humor behavior, there was a history of positive relationships with their mothers. These children were raised in an almost stress free environment, and their mothers were protective, approving, and warm. However, by age three, the mothers of these children showed little affection but were still protective and babying, and the youngsters displayed the most developed sense of humor. By the time these children entered elementary school, “tougher” children who had to cope with problems and conflict were showing the most humor development. School aged girls, but not boys, from homes with stress and conflict used humor to cope with problems but they were

often hostile, too. Boys with overly protective mothers tended to become class clowns in early childhood. In a study of 55 professional comedians, there seemed to be a pattern of good relationships with mothers and poor relationships with fathers (Janus, 1975).

However in the Janus research, only four comedians were female.

Seymour Fisher and Rhoda Fisher (1981) also investigated professional comedians and professional clowns with an almost equal number of males and females. Compared to other professions, the comics were more preoccupied with good and evil, duty, responsibility, concealment, and were more self-deprecating. They described their mothers more negatively than their fathers. Continuing their research with a control group, Fisher and Fisher revealed the mothers of the comedians were significantly less kind, less sympathetic, and more controlling and selfish than the mothers of non-comic children. The fathers of the clowns or comedians were noticeably more passive. Fisher and Fisher have theorized comedians gain approval and entertain others to cope with feelings of anxiety and anger because of their family environments.

Is nature or nurture responsible for comedians? In a behavioral profile of children with highly developed senses of humor, there were a number of distinct characteristics outlined by McGhee (1980): highly assertive style of interaction, talkativeness and precocious language development, sensitivity to adult attention and affection, and high effort and persistence in gross motor tasks but not intellectual and fine motor skills. Some additional research suggests a pattern of social assertiveness is common for children who do more clowning and joking (Fabrizi & Pollio, 1987). In a study of junior

high students those who were voted as “funniest” by their peers, the class clowns had a low score on self esteem. However, by high school their self perception scores had improved, and there was less disruptive behavior in the classroom. I wonder if these professors were class clowns. All of the ten professors had very strong social skills.

Another view of the sex differences in humor by males and females is the importance of status (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Miller (2001) has proposed a theory suggesting a witty sense of humor is an indicator of superior intellectual ability and is an evolutionary predictor of fitness and “good genes” as a potential mate. Besides the evolutionary theories regarding the functions of humor, one way humor has evolved involves how humor is a way to manipulate one’s status in a social group (Alexander, 1986). For example, a man may use a form of humor to make fun of someone in a group, and this would be a means of lowering their status and ostracizing them. In sexual selection humor is seen as a way of asserting superior intelligence by demonstrating wit (Miller, 2001). In evolutionary psychology, women would particularly see this as a desirable trait in a partner (Feingold, 1992). In our culture men may think of a woman who laughs at their jokes as a good partner, and women would be more likely to choose a partner who makes them laugh. Humor can also be used to control behavior and enforce social status. Using humor early in a group interaction is one way of establishing status, particularly by men (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Men were more likely to produce humor, and women were more likely to laugh. Men often use humor to assert their status and sustain their dominance (Spradley & Mann, 1975). Humor can also be one way to

gain approval by lower-status individuals through ingratiation. There is a close association between status, aggression, and dominating forms of behavior. In American society it seems to be more appropriate for males to be dominant and initiate humor or jokes than females. It seems to be a violation of cultural expectations for women to be joke tellers.

In this study I found the male and female professors had a strong sense of humor. In their teaching stories and during their interviews, I found all ten professors to be very funny. However, Christopher Hitchens (2007) commented in an article in *Vanity Fair*, women are not as funny as men. He feels women are not funny at all. He remarks how women will brag about their new boyfriend as cute and so funny, but men would never boast how their new female love interest is pretty and makes him laugh. This attitude by Hitchens reflects a devaluing of women in our culture. "An equal role for women in the organization of society has never been the norm" (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988, p.3).

In the 1986 book, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule describe the social construction of knowledge by women and how women develop an understanding of truth, information, and learning. The production, appreciation, and functions of humor seem to be very different for men and women. Women may define using humor in a different way in the classroom. There is no doubt that it reflects the fact that male professors receive more attention for their humor than female professors do. There is a great deal of pressure for women college professors to be taken seriously in their work. Humor can be misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Women may feel their professional credibility may be weakened if they are seen as silly or frivolous. Efforts to use humor in the classroom should never be promoted at the expense of your reputation.

Further sex differences in humor production may be the result of stereotype vulnerability. For example, a man may hesitate to use a creative method of humor in his class because of a fear of failure or embarrassment. A woman, by contrast, may have an extra burden in attempting a new humor technique and fear failure, but she may also have the feeling she could be judged or treated in a negative stereotype or do something to confirm the stereotype of inept women professors (Steele, 1999). Negative social stereotypes can influence bright and well-prepared professors.

In Chapter II, I briefly reviewed some of the differences between male and female professors' use of humor in the classroom. Male and female instructors are judged differently on appeal, delivery, competence and overall effectiveness (MacAdam, 1985). According to one study, male instructors can deliver almost all types of humor in the college classroom, but females do not use puns because it can decrease their evaluation ratings for effectiveness (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillman, 1980). More recent research has suggested some gender differences may have disappeared (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). I did not see any differences in the methods, attitudes, or behavior described by the ten professors interviewed for this study. However, there is a difference in the number of women professors deliberately using humor in the classroom. There are a number of personal and cultural pressures

influencing women professors intentionally planning activities for humor. Additional research should be conducted about these gender differences.

### *Teaching as Performance*

In contrast to how comedians measure their success by laughter, teachers measure humor's effectiveness by how it promotes learning (Huss, 2008). An interesting component of this finding centered on how the professors told me they felt as if they were performing in front of audiences using props and rehearsing for their classes. The teachers' perceptions revealed characteristics of performance that connected them to their students in social, emotional, and cognitive ways.

Bain (2004) in his book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, outlined how effective college professors treat everything they say to their students as a conversation. He then continued by comparing teaching to a performance. Good teachers engage their students with stimulating lectures and interactive exchanges. They paid attention to their timing, pacing, eye contact, clarity, body language, and content. Teachers are not actors, however, good teachers affect their audience as they talk, capture their attention, inspire their actions, and provoke thoughts.

In my own teaching, I had understood and been aware of some aspects of teaching as performance. During the interviews the participants made several references to teaching as performance. I believe the professors understood how deliberate humor in the classroom does require thought and practice. Although their actions may have seemed effortless to the students, sometimes humor takes planning and organization. Good

teaching sometimes demands drama. Parker Palmer (1998) describes how we can feel connected to an actor or actress on the stage when they deliver their lines. Teachers must not only connect to students but compel them to learn through our actions and dialogue with the audience in the classroom. It can be a powerful performance.

A number of studies list interest in subject, clear teaching, and enthusiasm as major influences in student evaluations of professors (Lowman, 1994; Marsh, 1986; Erdle, Murray, & Rushton, 1985). Lowman (1994) views intellectual excitement and interpersonal rapport as two important, independent qualities possessed by excellent teachers. Lowman's research about teaching methods and personality characteristics of outstanding professors has focused on how these teachers have developed a personal style of public speaking which is often flamboyant or quietly intense. He refers to all these characteristics and combines them to a dimension of teaching that stresses the instructor as performer. When professors engage and stimulate students using skill as a dramatic performer, it can motivate students and communicate positive concern (Lowman, 1994).

College teachers who have developed a personal style that may be viewed as flamboyant, whimsical, sardonic, dramatic, or intense are likely to be considered engaging and energetic by students (Lowman, 1994). These professors also revealed his or her mind, body, heart, and soul just like a performer every day in class (Berk, 2009). I was surprised to hear so many references to performance as they discussed their teaching.

Students often find dramatic teachers engaging and energetic as contrasted to dull, lifeless instructors. Reinsmith (1992) characterizes professors who stimulate and even



captivate students with their lecturing or dramatist style as presentational. Reinsmith considers presentational professors as one the archetypes of teachers. During two of the observations, I watched as the professors used many dramatic techniques to engage their students. One professor used a female voice to demonstrate a women's response. He made faces to illustrate a baby's reaction to a wet diaper. Another professor waited patiently for the students in the class to grasp the punch line to a joke, and then she connected the joke to the statistical concept she was teaching.

A pioneer in the humor movement in teaching, Berk (2009), used a metaphor for teaching and performance in an article and called it: *Putting It on the Line*. In the Broadway musical, *A Chorus Line*, a line of white tape was placed across the front of the stage. This line is where the dancers stand as they audition and sometimes during the shows. The musical is about dancers and all of the sacrifices they make mentally, physically, and emotionally when they perform in shows. They bare their minds, bodies, souls, and hearts during every performance. Berk suggests that "putting it on the line" is a metaphor for many careers and for life in general. He presents the idea of how a college professor will bare his or her mind, body, heart, and soul before the students in classes. Berk proposes that we reveal our inner and outer selves in our daily interactions with our students. We share our minds as scholars and our skills as professors. We send messages in our physical appearance and through our bodies through our clothing and body language. We share our hearts in our personalities, our sense of humor, and through our respect and caring for students. We bare our souls through our beliefs, morals, and

philosophies. The professor “puts it on the line” for their students. A dancer would make their mark or know their mark.

The four elements of mind, body, heart, and soul are shown to students, just like a dancer through performance after performance, in our classes. Berk also points out how some professors only concentrate on the “mind,” and stresses we influence our students in many other ways including our compassion, understanding, and as role models (Berk, 2009). Atherton (2002) explained: “Entertainment in teaching should be an epiphenomenon--a spin-off from the achievement of learning, not a route to it” (p. 5).

Teaching as performance also links to the first finding in this study regarding the development of the teaching identity through the use of humor. The concept that our identities are a social construction is derived from Cooley’s idea of the “looking glass self.” He presented the belief that our vision of ourselves is developed by watching and even imagining other people’s reactions to us (Cooley, 1902). According to Cooley, the “self” is dynamic, and we create our identities in the presence of others, both real and symbolic. The self is a performance, and it is influenced by audience and setting. The self is also affected by our perceptions of the audience and the setting. Erving Goffman (1959) also discusses identity development working within the symbolic interactionist perspective. He was particularly concerned with how identities are situated and presented with an audience in mind. Goffman used a dramaturgical metaphor of identity construction and emphasized performances are expressive and performed for others.

Another way teaching can be seen as a performance was discussed by Rossiter and Clark (2007): “As educators, what we teach is *our* story, our selection and framing of reality. In the narrative mode of education, it is not possible or desirable to disconnect our own story from the teaching/learning activity” (p. 95). Rossiter and Clark also describe educational drama as a form of narrative where the purpose is to foster learning. They stress it is not just theatre performance but can be story-telling, improvisation, or personal stories. The professors in this study often share personal stories to bond to their students and to connect to subject material.

### Conclusions

This study is not intended to be an exhaustive look at humor in the classroom. One of my passions is teaching, and I sincerely believe humor is very valuable in our lives and in our classrooms. I am interested in how and why college professors intentionally use humor in their teaching. I have reached several conclusions after considering the literature, interviews, and findings in this study.

Humor is powerful. Before writing this dissertation I considered humor as just one method teachers use to communicate and connect with their students. However, as I began to study and reflect about humor, I have concluded the use of humor is a reflection of ourselves. We use humor that displays our personalities. Our individual teaching identities are shown by the way we produce and appreciate humor in the classroom. The use of humor is individually determined. It is also socially constructed. Using humor can enhance a teacher’s confidence. Humor can improve a professor’s mood and make us

anticipate a class when we are going to use humor. Laughter in the classroom can help us to bond with our students. Humor can help set an atmosphere in the classroom where students feel receptive to learning. A teacher is a unique composite of many influences, and professors who use humor have modeled their mentors or their family members who are funny. Humor is a part of their teaching style, and we use humorous ways that fit our own personalities. These ten professors and I could not teach without using humor. There is great pressure to conform in higher education to teach by lecturing and presenting a serious persona in the classroom. It takes great confidence and self assurance to risk using humor in front of students. However, we have learned that humor is very beneficial to our students and for professors. There are many creative ways to use humor in the classroom. I was amazed by the many stories the participants shared with me. Again, the techniques were another way of finding self expression.

Gender was more significant in the selection of participants and the use of humor than I expected. The focus on gender in the literature was more salient than I anticipated. Although women are entering higher education in greater numbers, the use of humor in our communication and teaching styles still have significant distinctions.

One participant told me and I observed in his classroom a very negative manner in the use of humor toward students. At first, these unexpected results were very upsetting. However, I began to realize that his behavior is another example of how humor is very individual. The “discrepant professor” believes he is very funny. He feels his use of humor is helpful in the classroom. My opinion is that his dysfunctional behavior reflects

his own struggle to find superiority and power in the classroom. Offensive humor can be very dangerous. Unlike an audience for a professional comedian, our students are reluctant to walk out. They can leave the class, but they are more likely to remain in the classroom and become angry or resentful about the inappropriate humor. This can be personally unpleasant and possibly damaging to their psychological well-being.

Another implication for me from this study was the illumination of how humor is not just what we do in the classroom. More than one professor stated how using humor shows how their lives are filled with joy. Using humor reflects their positive view of life. One professor stated we are role models for our students. Life is filled with ups and downs and good and bad. We should never risk our professional credibility with silliness, but we should share the joy, happiness, pleasure, ecstasy, bliss, elation, and thrill of life and education with our students.

#### Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Further Research

This study has implications for practice for both college teachers and college administrators. I want to stress three:

- 1) Find ways to share your best practices in the use of humor with other professors.

I am often asked to describe how I use humor in the classroom to engage students. I can tell them several ways I teach psychology, but the professors who instruct in their own fields are better suited to know the objectives of the topic. However, I also get some of my best ideas from professors in other disciplines, because their perspective is a little different from my own. At my

college we call it “Communicating across the Curriculum,” and it is usually very enlightening to hear about the successes and failures of teaching techniques and instructional ideas. Read books and articles about humor in the classroom and be informed about the latest online videos. Attend a seminar about humor in the classroom to gain new insight.

2) Mentor a new professor. I am amazed when a new teacher asks me a question about my teaching practices using humor. I still get nervous and excited about teaching every day, but I am no longer fearful of failing or embarrassing myself. I will laugh and admit I made a mistake or don’t know the answer to a problem. New professors also bring new knowledge and notions about teaching. I frequently ask other professors if I can sit in and observe their classes so I can learn new ideas. Befriending a new teacher will be beneficial to both of you.

3) Educate professors about the benefits of humor for them personally. I found that professors are aware of how humor improves the classroom climate, but they had not reflected on how humor can help them personally. I wanted to give them a list of all the benefits I had learned in my research and from the interviews to strengthen their future behavior using humor.

After completing this study, there are several areas of research that I recommend be explored.

1) Study how professors develop in their use of humor in the college classroom. I believe there would be great variability in the narratives, but some patterns

could emerge about how their teaching identities developed, and how their values and use of humor may have changed.

- 2) Study the role gender plays in the use of humor in the classroom by college professors.
- 3) Study the functions of humor in the classroom and consider gender differences.
- 4) Study the development of humor in children to consider gender differences.
- 5) Study the role of humor and status for college professors
- 6) Study the gender differences in humor production in the college classroom.
- 7) Study the effect of gender on humor appreciation in the college classroom.
- 8) Study the effect of age, race, or gender on humor production in the college classroom.
- 9) Study specific types of humor used in the college classroom and determine the teachers' reasons for using each type and the influence of each on the teaching/learning process.

*We don't laugh because we are happy. We're happy because we laugh.*

*William James*

*I am happy, and I laugh, because I have finished my dissertation.*

*Karen Buckman*

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APPENDIX A  
TELEPHONE SCRIPT

## Why Did the Professor Cross the Road: How and Why College Professors Intentionally Use Humor in their Teaching

Hello. My name is Karen Buckman and I am a graduate student at Texas A&M University working on my Ph.D. in adult learning. I am researching information for my dissertation.

Your name has been given to me by either a Director of a Center for Teaching Excellence or a colleague who knew you used humor in your classroom. The purpose of the study is to learn how and why college professors intentionally use humor in their classrooms and what influence humor has on their teaching and how they think about it and how they use humor to shape classroom climate.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an audio-taped interview for approximately 60 minutes in length. I may also ask to observe and take notes in one of your classes where I would not be active or involved in any way with your students for approximately one hour. Your participation will be audio recorded during the interview only.

The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life. The possible benefits are: providing specific ideas and practical techniques about humor in the classroom for other instructors and understanding how professors think about their deliberate use of humor and how it influences their teaching. You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, this study will help other teachers understand how humor can be used to create a positive learning environment.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decide not to participate or withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

The study will be confidential and your responses to the interview questions will not be available to anyone other than the principal investigator, Karen Buckman and my faculty supervisor. The records of the study will be kept private and no identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely for 5 years and then erased and only Karen Buckman and my faculty supervisor, Dr. Carolyn Clark, will have access to the records.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me, Karen Buckman, or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Carolyn Clark. If you have questions as a research participant, you may contact the Human Subjects' Protection Program or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University.

I have four questions to ask you to determine if you would be a professor who would like to participate in this study:

1: Do you intentionally use humor in the classroom?

2: Do you use a variety of techniques using humor in your teaching methods?

3: Can you describe one way you have intentionally used humor in your classroom?

4: Can you think of one specific story or incident that occurred when you used humor in your classroom?

If you are willing to be in the study, please indicate that to me, Karen Buckman.

(Yes or No.)

I will provide an information sheet to you on the day of our interview that will outline the material I have just read to you and providing you with phone numbers, email addresses, and contact information. When would be a good day and time for our interview?

Do you have any questions?

Thank you so much for your time.

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDY

## QUESTIONS for the Why Did the Professor Cross the Road: How and Why

### College Professors Intentionally Use Humor in their Teaching

Principal Investigator: Karen Buckman

- Tell me how you became a teacher. Who were some significant teachers you had in school and how did they influence you?
- What were your early experiences in teaching like? What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them? What were some high points and some low points?
- What role did humor play in your early teaching? How did you learn to use it effectively?
- As an experienced teacher now, how do you think about using humor in the classroom? How intentional are you in using humor in your teaching?
- Tell me about some times when you planned on using humor to teach a particular topic. How did you decide exactly what to do? What impact did it have on your students? How do you think it helped them to learn?
- Can you describe an experience when you used humor in a way you hadn't done before? How has your use of humor in your teaching evolved?
- How do you decide when humor is appropriate and when it is not? Can you describe a time or circumstance when you did not want to use humor?
- What do you see as the benefits of using humor in the classroom? What are the challenges?
- How do you think humor affects student learning?
- How does using humor benefit you as a teacher?
- What if I told you that you could not use humor as a teaching tool—how would that change how you approach teaching? How would it impact the satisfaction you derive from teaching?
- What would you tell a new teacher about using humor in the classroom?
- What is your philosophy of teaching and how does humor fit into that?



APPENDIX C  
INFORMATION SHEET

## Why Did the Professor Cross the Road? How and Why College Professors Intentionally Use Humor in their Teaching

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research.

You have been asked to participate in a research study about how and why college professors intentionally use humor in the classroom. The purpose of this study is: to learn how and why college professors intentionally use humor in their classrooms and what influence humor has on their teaching and how they think about it and how they use humor to shape classroom climate, and how it influences their own experiences of teaching. You were selected to be a possible participant because you were referred to me by a director of a Center for Teaching Excellence or by a colleague who knew you used humor in your classroom.

### **What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an audio-taped interview for approximately 60 minutes in length. I may also ask to observe and take notes in one of your classes where I would not be active or involved in any way with your students for approximately one hour. This study will take approximately 60 minutes for the interview and 60 minutes for the observation.

Your participation will be audio recorded during the interview only.

### **What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

### **What are the possible benefits of this study?**

The possible benefits of participation are: providing specific ideas and practical techniques about humor in the classroom for other instructors, understanding how professors think about their deliberate use of humor and how it influences their teaching, and helping us to understand how a professor's use of humor in the classroom can improve classroom. You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, this study will help other teachers understand how humor can be used to create a relaxed and supportive learning environment and how humor allows you to connect to your students in a meaningful way to facilitate their learning more effectively.

### **Do I have to participate?**

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

This study is confidential, and your responses to the interview questions will not be available to anyone other than the principal researcher and her faculty supervisor.

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Karen Buckman and her faculty Supervisor, M. Carolyn Clark, will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Karen Buckman and M. Carolyn Clark will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for 5 years and then erased.

You will not be identified by name or identifiable characteristics in any transcripts, written reports, professional presentations, or publications associated with the study.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Karen Buckman at 936-273-7371 or M. Carolyn Clark at 979-845-4086.

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu)

**Participation**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. If you are willing to be in the study, please indicate that to the researcher, Karen Buckman.

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## VITA

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## Education

- Ph.D. Texas A&M University, 2010, Educational Human Resource  
 Development, Adult Education  
 M.S. University of Central Missouri, 1977, Warrensburg, Missouri  
 Counseling Program  
 B.A. Culver-Stockton College, 1976, Canton, Missouri  
 Psychology and Sociology, Honors in Psychology

National Certified Counselor      khbuckman@comcast.net

## Professional Experience

Professor of Psychology, 2004 to Present, LoneStar College-Montgomery  
 Advisor for Psychology Club and Psi Beta, Chair for BELS division.

Adjunct Professor, 2001-2004, LoneStar College-Montgomery, Conroe, Texas  
 Adjunct Professor, 1998-2001 North Harris Community College, Houston, TX  
 Professor, 1992-93, 1996-97, Rogers State University, Claremore, Oklahoma  
 Adjunct Professor, 1993-96, Tulsa Community College

Coordinator of Community Education and Behaviorist, 1987-89, St. Mary  
 Hospital, Port Arthur, Texas

Counselor, 1983-87, Lamar University at Port Arthur, Texas

Director of the Women's Outreach Program, 1978-83, Linn State Technical College,  
 Linn, Missouri

Social Service Worker, 1977-78, Division of Family Services, St. Louis, Missouri