

Use of Humour in Classroom Teaching: Students' Perspectives

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Received: January 31, 2013; Revised: May 22, 2014; Accepted: May 29, 2014

Background: Humor is a valuable tool for establishing a conducive environment in classroom learning. From the teachers' point of view, "how" to teach effectively is a challenging task. It demands creativity and imagination to capture students' attention and interest in one's teaching. From students' point of view, a monotonous lecture would hinder their interest to concentrate in the classroom.

Objectives: The present study had two objectives; firstly to explore students' perspectives on the use of humor in classroom teaching and secondly to explore students' perspectives regarding teachers, using humor in classroom teaching.

Materials and Methods: Students were requested to respond to two questionnaires focusing on items related to the use of humor in classroom teaching, on a 4-point Likert scale (4 = Strongly agree; 3 = Agree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree). Data were summarized using median grade with interquartile range (IQR). Frequency analysis of the responses was performed and agreement to each item was calculated by adding the frequencies of strongly agree and agree responses. Disagreement to each item was calculated by adding the frequencies of strongly disagree and disagree responses.

Results: Students (n = 157; 97.5%) opined that humor if incorporated appropriately in classroom teaching is a good thing and also helps in better retention of the topic being taught (n = 141; 75.15%). Majority of students (n = 158; 98.12%) responded that use of humor in classroom teaching facilitates a good teacher-student relationship. Majority of students (n = 146; 90.67%) also felt that having a good sense of humor is an attribute of an effective teacher.

Conclusions: The present study revealed that students prefer humor to be integrated into classroom teaching. The thoughtful use of humor fosters better teacher-student relationship which might culminate in better student learning.

Keywords: Humor; Teaching; Education; Medical; Undergraduate

1. Background

Although the role of humor in medical education research is an emerging concept, it has been extensively explored in philosophy, linguistics and arts (1). Humor is a valuable tool for establishing a conducive environment in classroom learning (2). Humor is also useful in facilitating attention, motivation and comprehension in students (3, 4) and has been reported as one of the top five traits of an effective teacher (5). According to Cornett, humor has been an important factor in facilitating the retention of novel information (6). Over times and throughout history, humor has been used as a way of entertaining people in most academic disciplines.

Melaka Manipal Medical College (MMMC), Manipal Campus, Manipal University, India, offers the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) program, a five year program, run in twin campuses. The program envisages two and a half years of preclinical training in Manipal, India and the rest at Melaka, Malaysia. The institution is open to the concerns and suggestions of its stakeholders and plans and implements appropriate strategies to rectify them. It is accepted that students'

opinions of effective teaching will bring about changes in teachers' attitudes, therefore these qualities could be engendered in teachers (7). Effective teaching at MMMC is assessed periodically as a part of the institution's program evaluation process.

From the teachers' point of view "how" to teach effectively is a challenging task. It demands creativity and imagination to capture students' attention and interest in one's teaching. From students' point of view, a monotonous lecture would hinder their interest to concentrate in the class. Previous research studies indicated that humor plays a vital role in facilitating students' attention in classroom (2).

2. Objectives

The present study had two objectives; firstly to explore students' perspectives on the use of humor in classroom teaching and secondly to explore students' perspectives regarding teachers' use of humor in classroom teaching.

3. Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study was approved by the Institutional Research Committee (IRC) of MMMC and was completed in three months. Study subjects ($n = 161$) were medical students of MMMC, majority of whom (98%) are Malaysians. A convenient random sampling method was adopted. A modified version of the questionnaire, developed by Said Shiyab (8) was used. The first questionnaire had five main domains that in turn had items focusing on students' perceptions, regarding use of humor in classroom teaching. The second questionnaire also had five main domains that had items focusing on students' perceptions, regarding teachers using humor in classroom teaching. Students were requested to respond to the questionnaires on a 4-point Likert scale (4 = strongly agree; 3 = Agree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = strongly disagree).

Data was analyzed using SPSS software version 16 and summarized using median grade with interquartile range (IQR). Frequency analysis of the responses was performed and agreement to each item was calculated by adding the frequencies of strongly agree and agree responses. Disagreement to each item was calculated by adding the frequencies of strongly disagree and disagree responses.

3. Results

The response rate was 100%. The results of the questionnaire, (Table 1) focusing on students' perceptions, regarding use of humor in classroom teaching is described below. Regarding the definition of humor, 93.16% ($n = 150$) of the students agreed that humor means laughing and something intended to induce laughter or amusement ($n = 154$; 95.64%). Students ($n = 157$; 97.5%) opined that humor, if incorporated appropriately, is a good thing in classroom teaching and also helps in better retention of the topic being taught ($n = 141$; 75.15%). Majority of students ($n = 158$; 98.12%) responded that use of humor in classroom teaching facilitates a good teacher-student relationship.

When asked whether use of humor in classroom teaching will obstruct their thought processes, 24 students (14.89%) agreed. One hundred and fifty eight (91.92%) students felt that the use of humor in classroom teaching makes them feel more motivated and 141 (67.69%) opined that humor will increase the understanding of the content taught in class. Students ($n = 154$; 95.65%) responded that humor in classroom teaching will make them relaxed and alert ($n = 134$; 83.22%). In response to the question that whether humor in classroom teaching acts as a tool to communicate effectively, 151 students (93.78%) agreed.

The results of the questionnaire, focusing on students' perceptions, regarding teachers using humor in classroom teaching (Table 2) is described below. One hundred and fifty seven students (97.51%) preferred teachers to have a sense of humor while teaching. They responded that they understand the topic if the teacher presents the content in

a humorous way ($n = 140$; 86.95%). Students opined that a teacher with a good sense of humor makes them interested in listening ($n = 157$; 97.50%), comfortable ($n = 159$; 98.75%) and alert in class ($n = 141$; 87.57%), while 10 students (6.2%) felt that such a teacher makes them feel bored in class.

Students also felt that listening to a teacher with a sense of humor encourages them to express ideas ($n = 116$; 72.04%), helps them to interact with the teacher ($n = 135$; 83.85%), makes the topic interesting ($n = 149$; 92.54%) and helps them in remembering the matter ($n = 147$; 91.29%). Majority of students ($n = 146$; 90.67%) felt that having a good sense of humor is an attribute of an effective teacher.

5. Discussion

This paper reports students' perceptions on humor as a facilitating tool for learning. In general, in the present study, students felt that humor has a positive impact on learning, which is supported by previous studies findings (2-4, 8). The reason for its positive impact could be due to its power to gain and hold students' attention in classroom (9). When students are fully attentive, better understanding and better retention of subject matter is gained. Humor is reported to function as an emotion management tool (10), a means for increasing intimacy between people (11) and a strategy for alleviating stress (12, 13). The results of the present study also indicated that use of humor in classroom helped students to be more motivated and less stressed. When teachers use humor in classroom, it creates a tension free environment, which again increases students' interest to listen in the class. It could help students feel that they are part of the class and can increase effective teacher-student interaction. Additionally in the present study, students felt that teachers who present content in a humorous way help them to be more attentive in class.

It is reported that when teachers use humor, students learn more (14-16). The teacher student relationship in classroom, influences the quality of instruction and the learning environment created (17). The judicious use of humor can increase teacher effectiveness and student learning.

The present study revealed that students prefer humor to be integrated into classroom teaching. The thoughtful use of humor fosters better teacher-student relationship, which might culminate in better student learning.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students who participated in the study.

Authors' Contributions

Reem Rachel Abraham conceived the idea, contributed to data analysis and interpretation and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All the coauthors helped in data collection, data analysis and contributed to the final version of the manuscript.

Table 1. Students' Perceptions Regarding Use of Humor in Classroom Teaching

Items	Median Interquartile Range	Strongly Agree, No. (%)	Agree, No. (%)	Disagree, No. (%)	Strongly Disagree, No. (%)
The term humor means					
Laughing	3 (4, 3)	77 (47.82)	73 (45.34)	7 (4.345)	3 (1.86)
That which is intended to induce laughter or amusement	3 (4, 3)	80 (49.68)	74 (45.96)	5 (3.30)	0
Dramatizing	3 (3, 2)	15 (9.31)	66 (40.99)	67 (37.26)	10 (6.21)
All of the above	2 (3, 2)	24 (14.90)	55 (34.16)	44 (27.32)	9 (5.59)
Humor, if incorporated appropriately in classroom teaching					
A good thing	4 (4, 3)	86 (53.41)	71 (44.09)	3 (1.86)	1 (0.62)
A disturbing thing	2 (2, 1)	7 (4.34)	13 (8.07)	89 (55.27)	50 (31.05)
Helps in permanent memory of the topic being taught	3 (4, 3)	66 (40.99)	75 (34.16)	19 (11.80)	1 (0.62)
Facilitates a good teacher-student relationship	4 (4, 3)	87 (54.03)	71 (44.09)	2 (1.24)	1 (0.62)
when used in classroom teaching, humor					
Obstructs my thinking	2 (2, 1)	8 (4.96)	16 (9.93)	96 (59.62)	39 (24.22)
Makes me feel more motivated	3 (4, 3)	64 (39.75)	84 (52.17)	12 (7.45)	1 (0.62)
Increases my understanding of the content	3 (4, 3)	52 (32.29)	89 (55.27)	20 (12.42)	0
Humor in the classroom makes me					
Mentally disturbed	2 (2, 1)	3 (1.86)	5 (3.10)	97 (60.24)	54 (33.54)
Upset	2 (2, 1)	2 (1.24)	3 (1.86)	91 (56.52)	62 (38.50)
Relaxed	3 (4, 3)	63 (39.13)	91 (56.52)	6 (3.72)	3 (1.86)
Alert	3 (4, 3)	45 (27.95)	89 (55.27)	21 (13.04)	0
From my experience, humor in classroom teaching acts as					
A tool to communicate effectively	3 (3, 4)	60 (37.26)	91 (56.52)	9 (5.59)	1 (0.62)
A waste of time	2 (2, 1)	3 (1.86)	18 (11.18)	89 (55.27)	49 (30.43)
A disturbing teaching tool	2 (2, 1)	3 (1.86)	8 (4.96)	89 (55.27)	58 (36.02)

Table 2. Students' Perceptions Regarding Teachers Using of Humor in Classroom Teaching

Items	Median Interquartile Range	Strongly Agree, No. (%)	Agree, No. (%)	Disagree, No. (%)	Strongly Disagree, No. (%)
I like the teacher to					
Have a sense of humor while teaching	3 (4, 3)	74 (45.96)	83 (51.55)	3 (1.86)	1 (0.62)
Be serious while teaching	2 (3, 1)	6 (3.72)	45 (27.95)	58 (36.02)	51 (31.67)
Be funny all the time during teaching	2 (3, 1)	21 (13.04)	40 (24.84)	38 (23.60)	61 (37.88)
I understand the topic if:					
The teacher presents the content in a humorous manner	3, (4, 3)	54 (33.54)	86 (53.41)	11 (6.83)	8 (4.96)
The teacher gives the information only in a serious way	2 (2.5, 1)	3 (1.86)	37 (22.98)	55 (34.16)	63 (39.13)
The teacher tells jokes	3 (4, 3)	49 (30.43)	94 (58.38)	8 (4.96)	6 (3.72)
An amusing teacher makes me:					
Interested in listening in the class	3 (4, 3)	70 (43.47)	87 (54.03)	3 (1.86)	1 (0.62)
Comfortable in class	3 (4, 3)	69 (42.85)	90 (55.90)	1 (0.62)	0
Bored in class	2 (2, 1)	4 (2.48)	6 (3.72)	79 (49.06)	71 (44.09)
Alert	3 (4, 3)	45 (27.95)	96 (59.62)	13 (8.07)	5 (3.10)
Listening to a teacher with a sense of humor					
Encourages me to express my ideas	3 (4, 2)	44 (27.32)	72 (44.72)	15 (9.31)	26 (16.14)
Discourages me from concentrating in the class	2 (2, 1)	8 (4.96)	11 (6.83)	77 (47.82)	62 (38.50)
Helps me interact with the teacher	3 (3, 3)	36 (22.36)	99 (61.49)	12 (7.45)	11 (6.83)
Makes the topic interesting	3 (4, 3)	57 (35.40)	92 (57.14)	5 (3.10)	3 (1.86)
Helps for permanent memory of the topic	3 (4, 3)	59 (36.64)	88 (54.65)	10 (6.21)	2 (1.24)
I feel having a good sense of humor					
Is an attribute of an effective teacher	3 (4, 3)	67 (41.61)	79 (49.06)	7 (4.34)	6 (3.72)

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