

HUMOUR TO HUMOUR: LAUGHING YOUR MIND OPEN

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ABSTRACT

Humor is known to reduce students' stress and enhance their learning experience (Steele 1998). The objective of this study is to explore the conduciveness of using self-disclosure, sharing sessions and humor in maintaining a safe, sharing environment within the classroom thus establishing trust and encouraging students to actively participate in the academic process. A survey to assess the effectiveness of humor and self-disclosure was administered to a sample of 143 pre-university students of year 2012 and 212 students of year 2013 from the Cambridge GCE A-Level (A-Level), Australian Matriculation (AUSMAT) and Monash University Foundation Year (MUFY) cohorts. 20 questions were posed using a 5 point Likert scale. The difference in the student's responses based on the course undertaken was analyzed and the statistical significance of the differences was determined using standard error and t-tests (Seltman 2012). Results indicate that for the 2012 and 2013 cohorts, over 80 per cent and 78 per cent of the respective respondents agreed that the use of humor reduces students' tension. Over 79 per cent and 81 per cent agree that a fun and open lecturer fosters a more positive learning environment thus enhancing attention, attendance, learning and retention. Over 75 per cent and 82 per cent agreed that self-disclosure encourages rapport and development of a sense of comfort thus increasing the approachability of lecturers. There appeared to be no significant difference between courses to the responses chosen. This study indicated that students did perceive humor and self-disclosure as an effective teaching tool. Therefore educators should seriously consider transforming lectures from being perceived as boring, difficult and stressful experiences into a positive learning environment.

Keywords: classroom humour, self-disclosure, active learning, confidence building

INTRODUCTION

A major part of the teacher's role is to navigate the complex drama of classroom life. Although the essential goal is to master the subject matter, the manner in which the information is presented to students greatly impacts their learning (Berk 1998). Balancing classroom order, while at the same time establishing good interpersonal relationships with students, is indeed a tricky and constantly challenging aspiration (Steele 1998).

Learning is hard work and an injection of motivation, humor or sharing of subject-related life experiences at the right moment can make all the difference. According to a study done by Garner (2005), the proper use of humor, analogy and metaphor appropriate to the topic being taught increases comprehension and retention of material both crucial to the learning process. Laughter, humor and trust-enhancing sharing sessions make the learning experience more engaging, memorable and facilitate communication, rapport, openness and trust. This serves to jolt the student into action and capitalizing on this initial momentum, lessons can be resumed. Once students have opened up in the class, the anticipation of immediate feedback in the form of reaction from their peers or from the teacher is a very

strong motivator. Students will develop the initiative to routinely check with their peers and lecturers whether their understanding is progressing or just drifting aimlessly in concept space.

When a teacher exhibits the willingness to share personal encounters related to the subject matter, this creates a bond, giving rise to a profound sense of belonging and trust with students, leading them to be convinced of the lecturer's honesty and genuine care towards their well-being. This in turn will encourage the students to approach the lecturer with any subject-related doubts, thus reducing the student's stress of not 'getting it' and the lecturer's stress of evaluating their understanding. Morrison (2008) suggests incorporating humor to maximize learning, stating that positive emotions were linked to education. These positive emotions can be heightened for the students and lecturers, hereby creating an inspiring learning environment. Taking the time to bond and engage with students will create a healthy and valuable learning experience.

Research Questions

This study explored a few research questions:

- A. Does humor reduce the student's tension in the classroom?
- B. Does a fun and open lecturer foster a more positive learning environment thus enhancing attention, attendance, learning and retention?
- C. Does self-disclosure encourage rapport and development of a sense of comfort thus increasing the approachability of lecturers?
- D. Does the programme undertaken and cohort affect students' perception of a positive learning environment?

Limitations

The sample for this study was limited to Sunway College Johor Bahru Pre-University Students for the years 2012 and 2013 and did not include any gauge of effectiveness in terms of performance measurements such as test results before and after humor was instilled in the classroom. Another limitation is that the data only consists of student surveys. No additional survey was extended to lecturers to obtain their opinion based on experience incorporating elements of humor into classroom management. Students' responses on the effects of humor and sharing sessions may vary according to each individual student's perception of humor, the nature of humorous manipulation, family environment as well as the student's personality type.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Related Theories

There are several benefits of injecting humor and self-disclosure into the classroom environment, and many theories support these benefits. The Arousal Theory (Martin and Lefcourt 1988 as cited by Steele 1998) states that arousal is associated with both positive and negative psychological and physiological states. It plays an essential role in human performance in terms of the brain and the body's extent of responsiveness and readiness for taking action in stressful situations. Humor has been known to improve mood states before and after an unpleasant stimulus, thus reducing the effects of stress (Steele 2012). Humor is seen as an outlet to escape negative emotions and thus reduces discomfort and allows serious,

less interesting subject topics seem more palatable. The Anxiety Reduction Theory also supports that the use of humor correlates positively with the release of stress in the classroom (Steele 1998). Other related theories also mentioned by Steele (1998) are The Psychoanalytic Theory and Relief Theory.

Psychological Benefits

In a study by Berk (1998), it was concluded that humor does play a vital role in reducing anxiety as well as stress and thus improve performance in examinations. There also exists evidence that with the introduction of humour to a testing situation, students who are anxious tend to perform better on the tests. Taking oneself lightly encourages a more holistic learning process by increasing the students' self-esteem. Students can then focus solely on the art and sheer pleasure of the learning process, without putting too much pressure on themselves (Steele 1998).

Educational Benefits

The gap between a teacher and a student, when bridged, can lead to an enhanced sense of comfort in the classroom, joining both parties together in a mutual quest for pure knowledge. Lecturers with a sense of humor are perceived as being warm and genuine, making it easier for the students to approach them for better teacher-student interaction. Classrooms with relaxed atmospheres foster greater creativity and critical thinking skills, essential to a conducive and enjoyable learning experience (Steele 1998).

METHODOLOGY

A survey to assess the effectiveness of humor and self-disclosure was administered to a sample of 143 pre-university students from the 2012 and 212 students from the 2013 A-Level, AUSMAT and MUFY cohorts. 20 questions were posed using the 5 point Likert scales. A sample of the survey form is appended as Appendix I. Research question A (**RQ A**) is gauged by responses to Questions 1, 4, 7 and 18. Research question B (**RQ B**) is answered by Questions 2, 3, 6, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 19 and 20 while Research Question C (**RQ C**) can be answered using responses to Questions 5, 8, 9, 10 and 14. Survey results were analyzed in terms of the percentage of students who selected each response. The percentage of students who strongly agreed and agreed to the questions related to each research question were compared between the programmes. The difference of students' responses based on the programme undertaken was also analyzed and the statistical significance of the differences was determined using standard error and t-tests (Seltman 2012). This answered Research Question D (**RQ D**).

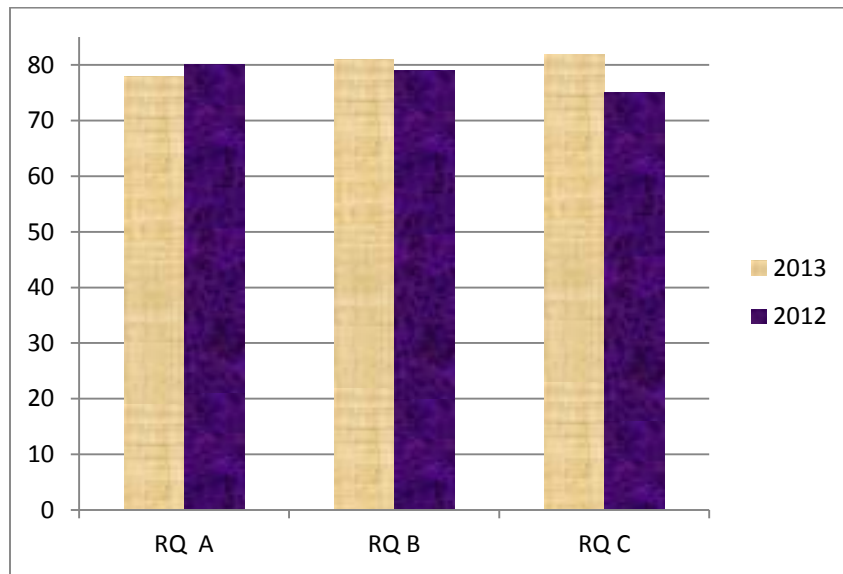
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from this study support all the research questions. Results indicated that for the 2012 and 2013 cohorts, over 80 per cent and 78 per cent of the respective respondents agreed that the use of humor reduces students' tension (RQ A). Over 79 per cent and 81 per cent agreed that a fun and open lecturer fosters a more positive learning environment thus enhancing attention, attendance, learning and retention (RQ B). Over 75 per cent and 82 per cent agreed that self-disclosure encourages rapport and development of a sense of comfort thus increasing the approachability of lecturers (RQ C). Table 1 shows the percentage of students per programme that were in support of each RQ for the 2013 and 2012 cohorts respectively. Figure 1 represents the mean percentage of all pre-university students who are in support of each research question.

Table 1: Percentage of students in support of the research questions per programme in 2013 and 2012.

Research Question	Percentage Students In Support					
	2013			2012		
	A-LEVEL	AUSMAT	MUFY	A-LEVEL	AUSMAT	MUFY
A	76	79	80	82	78	81
B	79	81	82	78	84	74
C	85	82	78	74	78	74

Figure 1: Mean percentage of all pre-university students who are in support of each research question for the 2013 and 2012 cohorts.

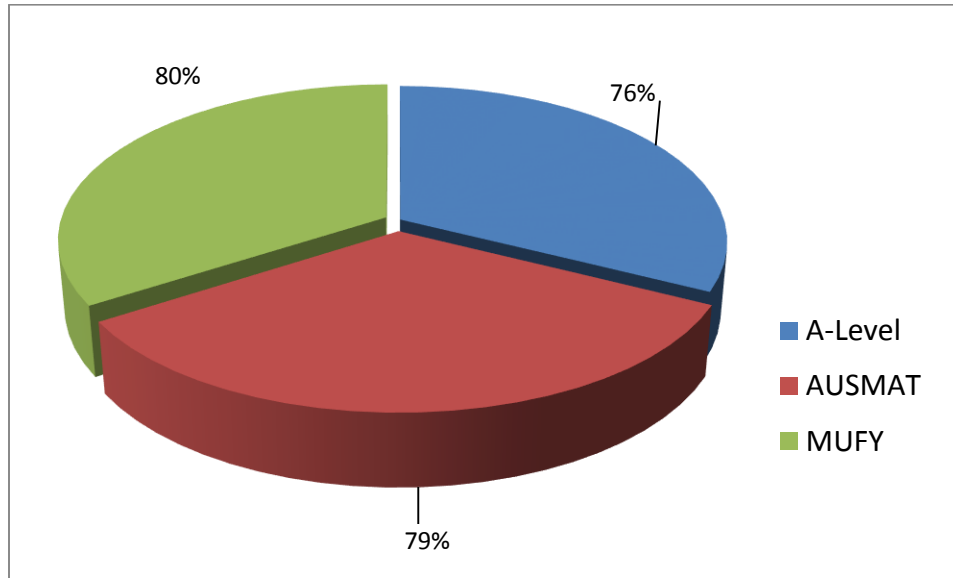


Research Question A

The results of the survey showed that 76 per cent of the A-Level students, 79 per cent of the AUSMAT students and 80 per cent of the MUFY students agreed that the use of humor reduces students' tension. Upon analysis of the results, there was no significant difference between the percentage of

students of the different programmes who agreed that the use of humor reduces students' tension, in support of research question D as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Percentage of students who agreed that the use of humor reduces tension.

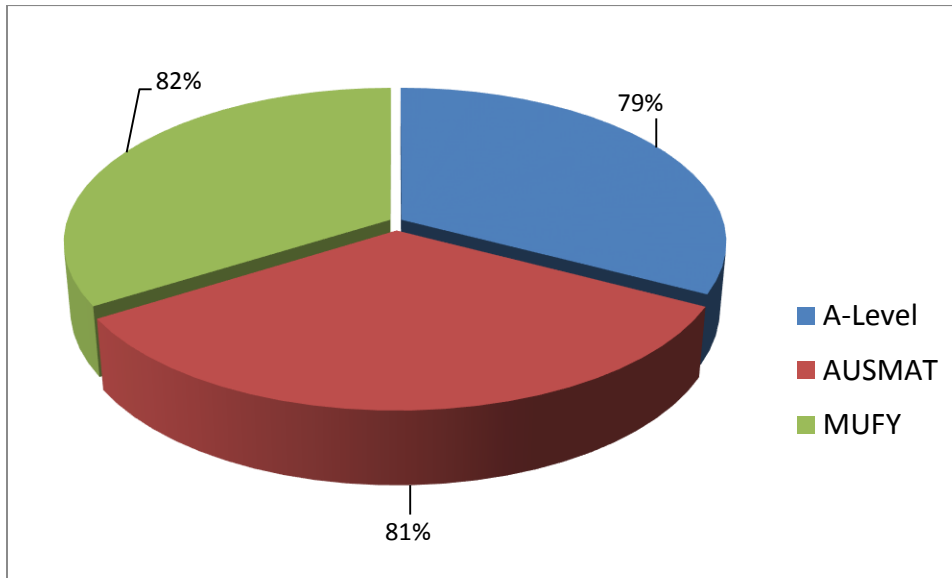


These results clearly show that most students agreed that a lecturer's job is not merely to teach, there is also an element of 'entertainment' involved. Students also feel more relaxed with a lecturer who is more open and allows constructive free communication. In addition, students mostly prefer lecturers who at least attempt at some humour rather than not be humorous at all, even if the element of humour ends up being not humorous.

Research Question B

Upon analysis of the results, it appears that 79 per cent of A-Level students, 81 per cent of AUSMAT students and 82 per cent of MUFY students agreed that a fun and open lecturer fosters a more positive learning environment thus enhancing attention, attendance, learning and retention. There was no significant difference between the percentage of students of different programmes who agreed that a fun and open lecturer fosters a more positive learning environment thus enhancing attention, attendance, learning and retention, which also supports research question D. Figure 3 summarizes this.

Figure 3: Percentage of students who agreed that a fun and open lecturer fosters a more positive environment.

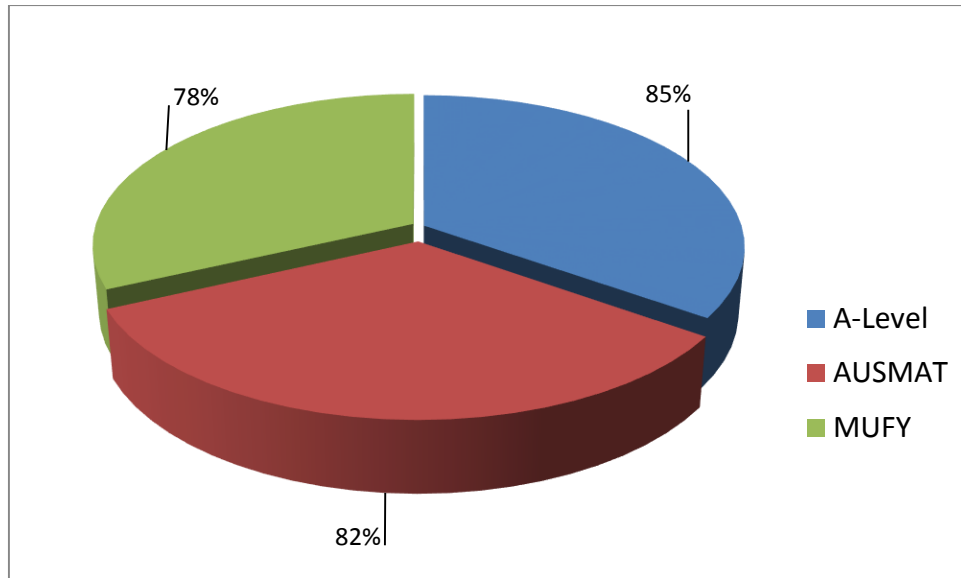


As a result of this research question, it appears that most students fully support the inclusion of humour when delivering materials as they feel this makes the lesson easier to retain. Furthermore, a fun learning environment holds the attention of the class towards what is being taught and also encourages attendance due to the anticipation of the next interesting lesson delivered.

Research Question C

Upon analysis of the results, 85 per cent of the A-Level, 82 per cent of the AUSMAT and 78 per cent of the MUFY students agreed that self-disclosure encourages rapport and development of a sense of comfort thus increasing the approachability of lecturers. There was no significant difference between the percentage of students of different programmes who agreed that self-disclosure encourages rapport and development of a sense of comfort thus increasing the approachability of lecturers. Figure 4 summarizes this.

Figure 4: Percentage of students who agreed that self-disclosure encourages rapport and development of a sense of comfort thus increasing the approachability of lecturers.



These results indicate that an overwhelmingly high percentage of students consider lecturers who allow subject-related reflective sharing sessions with a touch of humour as being genuinely concerned, rendering them as approachable. Students mostly agree that a classroom atmosphere with open communication and humor puts them at ease to actively participate in classroom activities. These attributes also enhance the teacher-student rapport, which makes any academic advice and motivational guidance by the lecturer increasingly more valuable to the student.

Research Question D

The percentage of students in each programme who agreed to all three Research Questions A, B and C respectively were comparable as shown in Table 1. A total of 78 per cent and 80 per cent of all pre-university students of the year 2013 and 2012 respectively agreed that humour relieves and reduces classroom tension. In addition, 81 per cent and 79 per cent of all pre-university students of the 2013 and 2012 cohort respectively are in support of the statement that a fun and open lecturer fosters a more positive learning environment. Meanwhile, 82 per cent of the 2013 cohort and 75 per cent of the 2012 cohort of all pre-university students surveyed agreed that self-disclosure encourages rapport and development of a sense of comfort which in turn increases the approachability of lecturers.

As each pre-university programme consists of different subject combinations, duration and assessment styles, it is evident that regardless of the programme undertaken, most students have a very positive reaction towards the use of humour in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Sharing laughter and personal experiences will increase one's confidence and internal ability to adapt. Once a bond is forged and a conducive atmosphere established, students will share ideas to creatively maximize every lesson. This optimistic energy will then capture the attention of the students and lecturer by alerting the attention center of the brain. This will in turn increase the likelihood of memory storage

and long term retrieval. This study indicates that students, regardless of the programme and cohort, did perceive humor and self-disclosure as an effective teaching tool.

The competitive lifestyle of today's society is riddled with deadlines, regulations and demands that lead to tension and stress, even for students. A learning environment should be as stress-free as possible, and it is up to the educators, as the facilitators of the classroom, to liven up the air and free students' minds of all other distractions to make way for a holistic learning experience. Small measures can be taken to incorporate elements of humour into classroom activities, either in the form of fun anecdotes in each handout, comics as an introduction to new, otherwise factual lectures or light hearted discussions of subject-related current issues to conclude a topic taught. These small efforts at being more open with students will go a long way in creating a highly constructive learning environment and will never be considered as a waste of lecture time, as it is a key element in engaging students for a smoother and more efficient flow of the entire lesson. The lecturers' stress levels will also inadvertently be reduced, once the tension is lifted in the classroom, allowing for a fruitful and gratifying teaching experience with positively energized and proactive students.

RECOMMENDATION

The endless potential benefits of humour are tied closely to the appropriateness of its usage. It is highly recommended that educators take it upon themselves to model the utilization of appropriate forms of humour. Educators are extremely influential in molding the minds of young students. Therefore with this immense responsibility, it is essential that a clear line is drawn to limit the extent of the application of humour. Derogatory, sarcastic snides should never be included at any point in the classroom, regardless of its comic relief. This practice by the educator will enable students to be able to make a clearer definition of the appropriateness of humour, which can then be a vital tool to adapt and survive in this stress-induced society. Therefore, it is recommended that educators consider the incorporation of humour into the classroom environment as a mechanism for relieving stress and creating a more conducive learning environment.

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APPENDIX I

DARE TO SHARE: Opening Minds Through Opening Up

Meera Rada Krishnan

SURVEY FORM

Pre-U Programme: _____ **Intake:** _____ **Gender:** _____

Please answer all the following questions honestly based on your individual opinion/ preference.
Circle the most suitable response based on the following assigned values:

- 5** Strongly agree
- 4** Agree
- 3** Neutral
- 2** Disagree
- 1** Strongly Disagree

	Question	Response (please circle only ONE option)				
1	A lecturer's job is to teach, not entertain.	5	4	3	2	1
2	A lecturer doesn't have to use humor to be an excellent educator.	5	4	3	2	1
3	Material presented using a sense of humor is easier to be retained in memory.	5	4	3	2	1
4	A lecturer who is open to share (self-disclosure) makes me more relaxed in class.	5	4	3	2	1
5	A lecturer who allows me to share my experiences (when related to the topic being taught) makes me feel like he/she has genuine concern for my academic performance.	5	4	3	2	1
6	A lecturer who makes the class fun keeps the class's attention to what is taught.	5	4	3	2	1
7	A lecturer who allows students to communicate freely relieves some tension and stress often associated with school.	5	4	3	2	1

8	A lecturer who uses humor in the classroom is approachable.	5	4	3	2	1
9	A degree of humor in the classroom enhances my relationship with a lecturer.	5	4	3	2	1
10	A classroom atmosphere with a certain degree of open communication and humor makes me more at ease to actively participate in classroom activity.	5	4	3	2	1
11	A lecturer who uses personal experiences to relate to difficult topics taught will help me to understand the concept better.	5	4	3	2	1
12	Sarcasm is inappropriate in the classroom.	5	4	3	2	1
13	Humor should never be used to embarrass or ridicule a student.	5	4	3	2	1
14	I feel motivated when a lecturer who has a good rapport with me gives me academic advice.	5	4	3	2	1
15	I am more likely to attend a class if it is delivered in an interesting manner.	5	4	3	2	1
16	I believe that I have a better sense of humor than most of my lecturers.	5	4	3	2	1
17	A lecturer who shares, allows sharing and instills humor in lessons wastes the classroom time.	5	4	3	2	1

18	I prefer a lecturer who attempts to be humorous and fails rather than a lecturer who is not humorous at all.	5	4	3	2	1
19	I am more likely to skip a class where I find the lecturer typically boring.	5	4	3	2	1
20	I eagerly look forward to the next class when I know the lecturer creatively introduces topics.	5	4	3	2	1