

Evaluating Management Educators: Does Being Funny Really Matter?

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Abstract

Research on the use of humor in education has improved dramatically over the last decade. Scholars are asking better questions and using better methods to seek answers. They know that educators earn higher ratings when they use humor, but is this because of the humor itself or is it just a side effect of the empathy and agility that makes educators effective? Evaluations of more than 800 teachers suggest that, funny or not, educators are more or less popular depending on whether they are approachable and patient. Interactions with other factors were insignificant, except for the interaction of being funny and being approachable, which was negative. The best predictors of whether an educator would be considered funny were whether they were (a) approachable and (b) agile. Controlling for how funny they were rated, educators were favored or not depending on the degree to which they were considered (a) clear, (b) approachable, and (c) agile. The evidence for a unique and powerful effect of simply being funny is lacking, and we might conclude that being found funny is just a side effect (indicator) of other factors that contribute to an educator's popularity

Introduction

As management educators, whether in the university or the corporate arena, we take user evaluations of our work seriously. They serve as substantial inputs to our performance appraisals even if their accuracy is debatable. It is not clear that they measure effectiveness, as opposed to popularity (d'Apollonia & Abrami, 1997) or grading leniency in universities (Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997) and they have been characterized, derisively, as opinion polls of customers (Williams & Ceci, 1997). Nonetheless, they are in wide use in industry and, with increasing adoption of a business model in higher education, their importance is likely to grow even in our colleges and universities. Thus it is important to understand thoroughly the factors that affect the ratings users will provide.

There can be little doubt that people's evaluations of an educator depend in part on popularity or favor (Wilson, 1998). This is especially true when evaluations are done during, or at the end of, an educational event. Such "on the spot" evaluations have the advantage of reaching all the participants while they are available and polling them while the memory of the event is fresh. However, participants have not had the time necessary to judge whether the lessons will really pay off, and there is little for them to base their evaluations on besides their enjoyment of the immediate experience.

It is accepted that the use of humor improves learners' evaluations of their educators (St. Pierre, 2001). This paper is about whether that is a causal relationship or just a spurious one. Does humor (being found funny by learners) contribute anything unique to positive evaluations, or is it just a side effect of other characteristics, such as being empathetic and having a quick mind?

Literature

Early research on the use of humor in the classroom tended to produce positive results using methods that were, at best, suspect. With a few laudable exceptions (e.g., Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillman, 1980), early studies used poor or non-existent controls, failed to define humor or

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differentiate it from fun and laughter, and sometimes even compared one teacher against another as if their use of humor were the only relevant difference between them. Thankfully, the picture has been improving greatly over the last decade.

There are still articles reminding us that humor is fun (Chabeli, 2008), cursory reviews of the research (Gunzelman, 2010), unabashed advocacy (Jonas, 2010), and simple lists of benefits and drawbacks (Lei, Cohen, & Russler, 2010). Some research still defines humor so loosely as to include any kind of fun (Baid & Lambert, 2010). A nursing journal opines that comedy is one of the four Cs of powerful teaching (Story & Butts, 2010) and humor is proposed, along with music and movement, as an effective way to engage student attention (Strean, 2011). Humor will always have its “true believers” whose purpose is to advocate it.

However, supplementing this work is a new wave of scholarship that takes a decidedly more scientific perspective. This is partly in response to longstanding pleas from within the humor research community for better controls and more cautious conclusions (e.g., Martin, 2002). However, it is also partly attributable to the entrance of established scholars from other fields and disciplines who are not willing to risk their hard-earned reputations with exaggerated claims or over-stated implications.

The trend toward better research is seen all across the interdisciplinary inquiry into humor, including in the area of humor in education. Scholars are testing “general knowledge” and, in some cases, verifying it. Recent research confirmed that learners gave higher evaluations to educators who used humor (Slocombe, Miller, & Hite, 2011), even when that humor did not work well.

Apparently, educators were earning points for at least trying to be funny. A meta-analysis suggested that the sense of humor was more important to today’s evaluators than it was in the 1980s (Romal, 2008), while another study suggested that it was more important to middle school students than it was to adult learners (Weinstein, Laverghetta, Geiger, & Peterson, 2008). Researchers are finding that the effective use of humor in education is not as easy or as foolproof as its advocates claim. Even the work of those who do acknowledge its complexity, and offer typologies to guide educators through it, is often found to miss the mark (Bell, 2009).

Among other things, spontaneous humor is an exercise in self-disclosure. Although getting too personal can be dangerous for an educator’s credibility and *gravitas*, a recent study suggested that a Facebook site with self-disclosure did not erode, and indeed supported, one educator’s credibility (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). Humor can be used to increase immediacy and trust. On the other hand, certain techniques from stand-up comedy were used to maintain enough distance from learners to avoid undue co-dependency (McCarron & Savin-Baden, 2008). Like most tools, humor can be used in different ways. An educator on social justice issues investigated how humor created a safe space for discussing controversial issues (Mayo, 2010), in much the same way that it can in therapy sessions.

There are, of course, cultural variations to consider. In China, educators are advised to use humor but avoid cynicism--which speaks badly of the user’s character--and irony--which is likely to be taken literally and thus misunderstood (Pollitt, 2010). Regarding Turkish school teachers, newer ones were found to use more humor than experienced ones, but it is not clear if that is due to age cohort or length of experience as a teacher (Yıldızbas & Cakır, 2009). Malaysian teachers of English as a second language reported avoiding the use of humor because of their own lack of confidence in their skills (Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, & Abdullah, 2011).

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More subtle questions are being asked by today's researchers, such as whether using humor in the classroom helps to encourage more self-reflection (Gordon, 2010) and how it helps teachers cope with their own stress (Evans-Palmer, 2010). Some have begun to speculate about coding schemes for studying humorous utterances (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011) and theories to guide its interpretation (Struthers, 2011). The specific intentional use of humor in games was isolated from the overall effect of the fun of playing games, and assessed individually (Dormann & Biddle, 2009). Neal Norrick found that student humor began by mirroring the instructor's lead, but quickly evolved into a way of testing conventions and developing a unique voice (Norrick & Klein, 2008). Humor generated by students, at the expense of their teachers, turned out to have surprisingly supportive intentions and effects, most of the time (Meeus & Mahieu, 2009).

Researchers are more objective and willing to report that an educator's use of humor can be an impediment to learning: one that is almost entirely invisible to its hapless user because of learner deference (DiCamillo, 2010). Looking at teaching, people reported using humor with family and friends much more than they did with their teachers (Kuiper, Kirsh, & Leite, 2010). Does this suggest that teachers should use humor, but learners should not respond in kind? Another study shows, without explicitly making this observation, that professors use humor to generate a brand in their own interests (Buckman, 2010).

With this more scientific attitude toward research on the use of humor by educators, it may be time to reconsider the actual effects of using humor. Leaving aside the more complex question of the relationship between humor and learning, this discussion will focus on the relationship between being found funny and being evaluated positively (favored). Given that educators who use humor tend to be evaluated more strongly than serious or self-important educators, should this effect be attributed directly to the use of humor? Perhaps other characteristics of effective education are, more or less accidentally, generating humor that learners appreciate.

Characteristics of effective educators. One study tried to quantify learner-evaluated characteristics of effective educators and came up with this list, in order. The most effective educators were rated as challenging, humorous, enthusiastic, creative, and caring. Also, they explained complicated material well and had a flexible instruction style (Malikow, 2006). A classic discussion, focused more directly on *favorite* educators, offered the following characteristics, in order. Effective educators were caring, competent, humorous, knowledgeable, demanding, and fair (Stronge, 2002).

This paper will ask whether the dimension "humorous" is really just the result of being sufficiently agile to come up with witty remarks about events on the spot, and sufficiently empathetic to understand what the learners will find funny.

Hypothesis 1. Funniness will be most correlated with, and predicted best by, the characteristics empathy and agility.

Hypothesis 2. After controlling for funniness ratings, all other characteristics of effective education will remain significant.

Hypothesis 3. Funniness will not stand alone as a unique component in the positive evaluation of favorite educators.

Method

Informants

Informants were 433 adults working full time in Pennsylvania. Students in several sections of my

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introductory MBA course, over a period of a year, recruited most of these informants for a few extra credit points. The informants were usually their co-workers in front-line management positions. Informants received no form of compensation for their participation, which was generally done as a favor for a peer who had just undertaken graduate studies. The informants were 53% female and, although they were not asked their specific age (just age groups), none appeared to be under 18 or over 50 years of age.

Procedure

Informants signed a typical informed consent form, informing them of their right to withdraw participation at any time, who to contact with questions or concerns, and so forth. The form also revealed that the purpose of this research was to study the effectiveness of humor in management education. Thus, they were primed to think of *management* education whether at work or in school (as opposed to favorite teachers over the course of their lives), and to think of humor as one of the factors in the discussion. They were perhaps likely to ignore or discount an effective and popular educator who had a serious or earnest style.

I asked informants to call to mind a favorite management educator. It was clear that they were to think of a favorite, as opposed to the most effective, management educator (while acknowledging that the two categories probably overlapped greatly). It was usually quite easy for informants to come up with an example of a favorite educator.

Then, I asked informants about ten different characteristics of that educator. How funny did they find the educator to be, on a scale of one to five, where one meant “not at all” and five meant “very much”? How patient, approachable, empathetic, and well-prepared did they find that educator to be, on the same scale? How well-informed on the topic, and how smart in general, did they find that educator to be? How clearly did they think the educator explained complicated material? Did they find the educator to be agile at coming up with alternate explanations and illustrations on the spot? Also, to what degree did they think the educator wasted class time?

After considering these issues, and noting the gender and age groups of the informants, I asked them to call to mind another management educator who had used humor a lot, but who was decided less favored. It was generally more of an effort for informants to find an example for this part of the inquiry, although some had an educator in mind right away. When they had an appropriate example in mind, I asked about the same ten characteristics in relation to that management educator, and thanked them for their participation.

Results

Tests of the Data

Systematic bias. I conducted an analysis of variance on several variables and combinations to check for any systematic variation related to gender or age group and found almost no significant differences. The only exception was that the 99 people in the 29-35 age group (about 24% of the informants) rated the funniness of favorites and less-favored educators significantly more consistently than the other age groups did. They were more likely to report that their favorite educator was about as funny as their less-favored one. No explanation for this phenomenon was found and it may have been just an anomaly.

Manipulation check. I compared favorite educators against less-favored ones. Predictably, favorite educators scored significantly higher on all of the characteristics (with strong t-scores

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ranging from -3.36 for wasting time to 33.94 for being approachable). I had hoped that informants would think of less-favored educators who were nearly as funny as their favorite educators, for comparison purposes, but they did not. It does not seem to be possible to separate liking an educator from enjoying her or his humor. The mean difference in funniness ratings between favorite and less-favored educators was 1.9 on a five point scale, with a 95% confidence interval of from 1.8401 to 2.0994 and a t-value of 29.86.

Tests of the Hypotheses

Spurious relationship. I expected funniness to be a spurious effect of the combination of two other characteristics: the agility to come up with witty remarks on the spot, and the empathy to sense what the learners would find funny. In fact, the correlations of empathy (0.719) and agility (0.692) with being found funny were not larger than being approachable (0.756), clear (0.698), or patient (0.695). Regression indicated that being found funny was dependent on being approachable, agile, empathic, smart, and not particularly well-prepared. Using just empathy and agility only generated an R-squared (adjusted) of 54.5% and was not as large as other interactions. The direct causal link with empathy and agility that I expected was not there as a separate effect, and Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Controlling for funny. To get a feel for interactions, I ran a binary logistical regression on favor (versus non-favor) which suggested that the top factors predicting favor were being funny, clear, and approachable. Taking funny out of that equation did not change the results much, just re-ordering the variables slightly. When all interactions with funniness were entered into the model, there was little change. The key interactions with being funny seemed to be with wasting time, being approachable, being agile, and being smart and all of these were negative. If funniness was having any effect on the other characteristics of educators, it seemed to be a damping effect. The combination of being approachable and funny, for example, was slightly less rewarded by evaluators than either being approachable or being funny.

Table 1
Before and After Controlling for Funniness

	Unadjusted				Adjusted			
	Less Favored		Favorite		Less Favored		Favorite	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Approach	2.43	1.11	4.57	0.69	2.87	0.05	4.14	0.05
Empathy	2.20	1.03	4.16	0.82	2.59	0.05	3.78	0.05
Patient	2.37	1.10	4.21	0.79	2.72	0.06	3.86	0.05
Clear	2.63	1.07	4.42	0.71	2.81	0.06	4.25	0.05
Agile	2.45	1.12	4.32	0.74	2.75	0.06	4.04	0.06
Prepared	3.40	1.21	4.39	0.81	3.35	0.06	4.44	0.06
Smart	3.38	1.08	4.35	0.73	3.49	0.06	4.24	0.06
SubKnow	3.60	1.06	4.49	0.67	3.66	0.05	4.43	0.05
Waste	2.59	1.38	2.31	1.14	2.80	0.08	2.11	0.08

To control better for the differences in funniness ratings, and examine which factors predicted who

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would be favored, I conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). The results were significant, $F(9, 836) = 51.82, p < .001$, suggesting that simultaneous differences existed based on the dependent variables, even after controlling for funniness. Informants preferred educators who were approachable and so forth, regardless of how funny they found the educator to be. The use of humor had not changed which factors were important or removed any of them from the equation, and Hypothesis 2 was supported.

However, it was not true that humor was having no real effect. Comparing the adjusted and unadjusted means and standard deviations/errors before and after controlling for funniness (Table 1) revealed that the funniness rating was exaggerating differences. When funniness was removed from the equation, scores for favorite educators decreased while those of the less-favored educators increased (with one exception). In general, funniness seemed to be a "double-edged spice," increasing the reward for positive characteristics and exacerbating the punishment for their lack.

The exception was the characteristic of being "well-prepared." In that case, removing the funniness variable increased the difference between the favorite and less-favored educators. Although this effect was small, it may suggest that using humor can compensate to a degree for poor preparation.

Components

Humor not unique. In a further attempt to understand the main factors in deciding between favorite and non-favored educators, I performed a principal components analysis. The results are presented as Table 2.

Table 2
Binary Logistic Regression on Favor

Predictor	Coef	SE Coef	Z	P	Odds Ratio	<u>Confidence Interval</u>	
						Lower	Upper
Constant	-27.7414	5.00786	-5.54	0.000			
Funny	5.59361	1.29834	4.31	0.000	268.71	21.09	3423.33
Approach	2.41159	0.672498	3.59	0.000	11.15	2.98	41.67
Empathy	0.368094	0.713102	0.52	0.606	1.44	0.36	5.85
Patient	1.22340	0.769270	1.59	0.112	3.40	0.75	15.35
Clear	0.887260	0.975210	0.91	0.363	2.43	0.36	16.42
Agile	2.01485	0.713922	2.82	0.005	7.50	1.85	30.39
Prepared	-0.820625	0.889683	-0.92	0.356	0.44	0.08	2.52
Smart	2.07022	0.933621	2.22	0.027	7.93	1.27	49.41
SubKnow	-1.85528	1.04605	-1.77	0.076	0.16	0.02	1.22
Waste	1.21466	0.573084	2.12	0.034	3.37	1.10	10.36
App X Fun	-0.444265	0.189900	-2.34	0.019	0.64	0.44	0.93
Emp X Fun	-0.0268604	0.194004	-0.14	0.890	0.97	0.67	1.42
Pat X Fun	-0.336908	0.218689	-1.54	0.123	0.71	0.47	1.10
Clear X Fun	0.0313103	0.268233	0.12	0.907	1.03	0.61	1.75
Agile X Fun	-0.414214	0.194971	-2.12	0.034	0.66	0.45	0.97
Prep X Fun	0.245778	0.227672	1.08	0.280	1.28	0.82	2.00
Smart X Fun	-0.547667	0.259707	-2.11	0.035	0.58	0.35	0.96
Sub X Fun	0.412706	0.279315	1.48	0.140	1.51	0.87	2.61
Waste X Fun	-0.346827	0.146424	-2.37	0.018	0.71	0.53	0.94

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Among management educators who had been selected as favorites, three components explained 61.9% of the variance (Eigenvalues greater than 1.0). The first component was made up of subject knowledge, clear explanation, and being smart and agile. I might call this component *Competent* and being funny was the characteristic that loaded least on that dimension. The second component was made up of being empathetic, patient, and approachable. I might call this *Friendly*, and being funny loaded highly on that dimension (0.339) along with wasting time. The third component was made up of being patient and empathetic, along with not wasting time or being agile, and mainly being decidedly *un-funny* (-0.699). I might call this *Concerned*, because it seemed to represent an intense and serious attitude toward the learner and the work. As noted in the methods section, this component of effective education may be understated, since informants were informed that the study was looking at the use of humor in education.

Among educators who were rated as less favored, two components explained 62.5% of the variance (Eigenvalues greater than 1.0). The first component was made up of most of the characteristics rated about evenly (between 0.309 and 0.394). Since there was no particularly negative factor, I might label this component *Mediocre*. These educators seemed to be doing what was required but, presumably, not remarkably well. The second component consisted of good preparation and strong subject knowledge, but with other characteristics rated negatively (-0.330 – -4.04). I might label this component *Cold*, describing an approach that is expert and knowledgeable, but without the warmth to win the audience over.

In general, humor was not a strong indicator on its own without the other characteristics, so Hypothesis 3 was generally supported. However, humor itself seemed to be major indicator of the difference between the *Friendly* versus *Concerned* educator. That specific finding was not expected and cannot be accounted for by the hypotheses provided.

Discussion

Favorite educators were competent, friendly, and/or concerned. Only the component that I have called friendly was strongly related to the use of humor. This study did not provide evidence that being funny would cause evaluators to think the educator was more competent or even more concerned. However, it did seem to cause evaluators to think the educator was more friendly and its lack seemed to almost define educator's concern. This inverse relationship between being seen as funny and being taken seriously has been seen before, and deserves more attention. The authority and *gravitas* of a management educator has value too, along with popularity, especially if any form of grading is going to be involved in the process. The variables I predicted would be synonymous with funny (empathy and agility) were not significantly related.

This study suffered from too narrow a focus, survey items that were not as broad as they could have been in an exploratory study, and the use of a convenience source for leads to research informants. However, it is an attempt to get more specific about the unique contribution of the use of humor to educator popularity. Future research should look at the differences, if any, in the online context.

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