



Short communication

Student and faculty perceptions of humor in the pharmacy classroom

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Abstract

Objective: To describe perceived effects of humor and preferred types and frequency of humor in didactic pharmacy instruction at one college of pharmacy.

Material and methods: Students and faculty at a college of pharmacy participated in a survey consisting of six research questions and seven demographic items. Research questions, formatted as 5-point Likert scales and multiple-choice items, were developed from studies assessing humor in other educational settings.

Results: A total 89 of 132 students and 20 of 27 faculty (response rate 67% and 74%) responded. Students and faculty agreed that there is a role for humor in didactic instruction (median: 4 and 5, respectively) and that humor could improve accessibility, learning, interest, attention, and enjoyment (median: 4 and 4, respectively, all items). Participants preferred relevant (median: 5 and 5) and self-deprecating (median: 4 and 4) humor. Students and faculty indicated one or two instances of humor per hour are optimal (52% and 50%) and typical (74% and 85%).

Conclusions: Students and faculty perceive a role for use of relevant humor (in moderation) in the pharmacy classroom based on improvements to the learning environment.

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Keywords: Humor; Instructional design; Immediacy; Engagement; Learning

Introduction

Classroom humor is one of many methods employed by educators to improve student learning.^{1,2} Humor has been hypothesized to increase learning via a variety of mediators, including attracting and maintaining attention, increasing student engagement, and creating a warmer classroom climate (i.e., immediacy).^{3–6} According to the Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT), appropriately used instructional humor related to the topic of discussion should

correlate in a positive manner to student learning.¹ IHPT also hypothesized that forms of inappropriate humor, whether they be offensive humor or humor not related to a discussion topic, used by the instructor would not positively correlate with student learning.

Humor, by definition, is intended to amuse.⁷ Amusement, in turn, creates positive effect, which has been associated with increased learning.⁸ Positive emotions have been hypothesized to improve learning by broadening the scope of attention (in contrast to negative emotions, which may result in a narrowing of focus)⁹ in addition to creating a warmer classroom environment in which students feel free to explore, make mistakes, and connect new learning with prior knowledge.¹⁰ Because of the benefits of appropriate humor on the learning environment (e.g., by improving immediacy, interest, motivation, and enjoyment), objective

Dr. Sheppard has passed away since preparation of this manuscript.

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studies assessing whether classroom humor improves learning in undergraduate students have had mostly positive results.^{11–15}

Several studies have attempted to characterize and assess use of humor in health professions education. A randomized controlled study of 90 fourth-semester medical students found that attendance and test scores were higher in a group of students who were exposed to instructional humor, leading researchers to conclude that humor can increase interest in the material and promote learning.⁵ A survey of nursing students found that the use of humor by a classroom instructor helped to reduce stress and anxiety among the students.¹⁶ Similarly, humor in the medical school classroom was found to reduce medical students' feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress in a randomized controlled study of 90 fourth-semester medical students.¹⁷

There is a paucity of published research specifically focused on humor in instruction of student pharmacists, as well as the “millennial” generation and professional students in general, despite recent interest in the topic.^{18,19} Given the emphasis in the 2016 Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standard 10.12 on using engaging teaching and learning methods,²⁰ the benefits of humor on learning and the learning environment,^{3–6,11–15} and previous studies in other health professions,^{5,17,18} it is appropriate to investigate the potential benefits of humor to improve student pharmacist learning. As a first step toward understanding the link between humor and learning in pharmacy school, the objective of this study was to describe perceived effects of humor and preferred types and frequency of humor in didactic pharmacy instruction at one college of pharmacy.

Materials and methods

A two-part cross-sectional study was conducted at Manchester University College of Pharmacy, Natural, and Health Sciences. The College contains a four-year doctor of pharmacy program that currently has candidate status with ACPE. All first and second professional year students (the complete student body at the time of the survey) and pharmacy faculty from both departments, Pharmaceutical Sciences and Pharmacy Practice, were invited to participate in this study. Data were gathered using two different surveys, one for faculty and one for students. The student and faculty survey questions are given in [Appendix A](#). A 5-point Likert-style items were developed by the study investigators based on a review of the literature,^{1,2} input from an undergraduate faculty member in psychology, and experiences of both student and faculty investigators. Some items were worded identically on both surveys (e.g., “There is a role for humor in pharmacy school classes”), while other questions asked for student and faculty perceptions of humor on student learning (e.g., “I learn more when the professor uses humor” in the student survey, compared to “Students learn more when the professor uses humor” in the faculty version). The survey items in the student version

were formatted as “I statements” in order to encourage students to think back to their own classroom experiences.

The survey also explored whether humor was perceived to detract from students' learning (e.g., “The use of humor makes complex topics more confusing”); these items were matched to positive statements of humor's perceived benefits (e.g., “The use of humor makes complex topics more accessible”). The final instrument contained questions designed to determine student and faculty acceptance of humor in the classroom, perceived optimal amounts of humor in this setting, and beliefs regarding effects of humor on aspects of the instructional environment such as learning, motivation, attention, enjoyment, and interest. In addition, faculty and students rated the appropriateness of different types of humor, including related, unrelated, self-deprecating, disparaging, offensive, spontaneous, and planned. Since these different humor types are not mutually exclusive, it was anticipated that several types of humor might be acceptable to students. Descriptions and examples of each type of humor are given in [Table 1](#). These terms were not explicitly used or defined in the survey instrument; rather, an example of the humor type was presented and participants were asked to rate its appropriateness in order to avoid bias that might be associated with terms such as “related,” “disparaging,” etc.

Student subjects were recruited via e-mail notification and announcements posted in the campus building one week prior to live conduction of the survey. First-year (P1) and second-year (P2) students were surveyed separately due to limitations on physical space. Lunch was provided as incentive for students to participate. All students completed the survey on paper with no make-up surveys given to students unable to attend. Faculty investigators were not present during data collection to avoid risk for biased responses. Faculty participants were recruited via e-mail, with two reminder e-mails sent at one and two weeks following the initial invitation. Faculty completed the survey online, and no compensation was offered other than an invitation to attend the lunch provided to students. Live informed consent was obtained from student participants by student investigators; faculty informed consent was electronically obtained. Student and faculty investigators were excluded from taking the survey. Lunch expenses were paid for using internal research funds.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data for the two surveys (i.e., student and faculty) separately. The student *t*-test and chi-square test (with Fisher's exact test for low response items) were used to compare faculty and students in terms of demographic characteristics. The Mann–Whitney *U* test was used to explore differences between faculty's and students' perceptions of appropriateness and utilization of humor. A two-tailed $\alpha = 0.05$ was used to determine statistical significance of all inferential tests. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22.²¹ This study was evaluated and deemed exempt by the Manchester University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

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