

LETTERS

In Response to “Use of Humor to Enhance Learning: Bull’s Eye or Off the Mark”

To the Editor. I read with interest the Viewpoints article by Poirier and Wilhelm on the use of humor to enhance learning in pharmacy education.¹ I believe I could lend a unique perspective to this topic; as the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs, I am the individual who students come to when they want to voice concerns about what they deem to be inappropriate humor. Further, while the authors noted that “faculty members are not stand-up comedians,” I do have a personal history of sweating through a comedy routine while standing in the spotlight, and have harnessed that experience to achieve slightly more laughs than groans when teaching in the classroom.

While humor may be a universal phenomenon, national and cultural differences in the use, frequency, and expression of humor are well documented.^{2,3} What is generally considered to be humorous in one culture can be taboo in another. The use of humor as an instructional tool is not a given in foreign or domestic secondary education systems; some students may never have had an instructor who incorporates humor into his/her teaching methods, and might not know how to react when they encounter it. Further, the types of humor that students have been previously exposed to – both inside and outside of the classroom – can vary greatly. For example, during admissions day activities for our program, I have stumped more than one student with the opening line of a knock-knock joke; what was designed to put candidates at ease led to an awkward situation that may have paradoxically increased their anxiety. The cultural and ethnic diversity in the classroom that is highly valued by the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education, and many pharmacy programs, can nevertheless make for a challenging audience.

Cultural and ethnic issues aside, the generation gap between most faculty members and students is significant. I like to think of myself as a “young 38 year old,” but the 14-18 year gap between me and most of my students can be a sizable obstacle. Pop culture standbys from my formative years – Seinfeld references, chart-topping music, and the O.J. Simpson trial (well, the *first* one) – do not resonate with most students. I once made a joke about the Winnie Cooper character from the sitcom *The Wonder Years*, only to be met by dead silence (later I remembered that *The Wonder Years* ended its broadcast run in 1993, when many of my students were wearing diapers). For

me, this generation gap is only going to intensify, as I will continue to grow older while the students in each successive pharmacy class will remain roughly the same age. (And anyone who read that last sentence and immediately thought of Matthew McConaughey’s character in *Dazed and Confused* likely suffers from the same generation gap I do.)

Last, pharmacy students perceive themselves to be significantly stressed, to the extent that their mental health-related quality of life is below that of national norms for 20-34 year olds.^{4,5} While laughter is known to be an effective stress reliever, stressed individuals are often poor listeners and may lose their sense of humor.⁶ Within my student affairs role, sometimes legitimate grievances involving inappropriate humor are brought to my attention, and these instances are addressed. However, many instances where students have deemed themselves to be offended have left me unable to rationalize their having taken offense, leaving me to determine if I failed to “get it” or if the student was hypersensitive to a perceived slight. Nevertheless, in an environment where a minimum of 79% of pharmacy students nationwide are members of one or more “protected groups” under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent legislation, everything except for the most benign humor should be avoided.⁷

So what have I found to be effective use of humor in the classroom? I attempted to construct a David Letterman-style “Top 10 List,” but fell 6 items short; pharmacy students are a tough crowd. As Poirier and Wilhelm suggest, self-deprecating humor rarely fails to deliver. Students seem to take great joy in hearing about my past mistakes and missteps, and all the better if the story incorporates a photograph of me sporting a full head of hair and unfashionable clothing. Humor regarding other faculty members is also appreciated; just ensure that you have your colleague’s permission before proceeding (lest you anger someone who might sit in judgment of you on the Promotion and Tenure Committee). Humorous videos involving pharmacy are often welcome, though one seemingly innocuous commercial managed to offend some individuals.⁸ Lastly, when lecturing on pharmaceutical marketing, I’ve had success telling a joke about the Viagra-logoed reflex hammers that Pfizer once distributed to physicians. I’d share that joke with you, but I see that the Editor is waiving me off the stage. Thank you! You’ve been a great audience!

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