The Value of Humor in Technology Education

"Astronauts never get athlete's foot. They suffer from missile toe!"

Technology teachers often find themselves in the position of defining technology education, then defending its place in school curricula. These efforts are especially needed when others trivialize technology education. McLaughlin (1998) notes that technology teachers are poorly portrayed on television: "When did you last see a 'shop teacher' portrayed in a serious light? More often than not, that 'shop teacher' is portrayed as an aged dullard who is the foil for a brighter and more articulate student population" (p.14).

As technology teachers steel themselves for the battle for recognition, appreciation, and even existence, there may be a tendency to lose sight of the lighter side. Humor can be an invaluable tool in technology education, with benefits to the students and the teacher. Some of these benefits are especially suited to the technology education classroom.

Stress Reduction, Motivation, and Immediacy
One benefit of humor is stress reduction. The medical profession has recently taken advantage of the health benefits from humor-induced stress reduction, but it is important to educators as well. Although technology teachers may think of their classes as relatively low-stress environments, their students may benefit from humor. Raeshide (1993) notes that humor in the classroom can "reduce tension, increase motivation, and aid instruction" (p.2). Hashem (1994) writes that play and humor in the classroom are effective at "relieving tension, facilitating students' understanding of materials or content, and encouraging students' participation. Besides helping to create a more pleasant classroom atmosphere, play and humor make it easier for students to work cooperatively and learn from each other as well as from the teacher" (Hashem, 1994, p.16).

An instructor using humor in a positive way may find that it helps to close the gaps between students, stimulating cooperative work and lessening the gap between the teacher and the students. Crump (1996) asked college students about their reaction to a variety of teacher immediacy behaviors, that is, those "behaviors which reduce physical and psychological distance between those interacting and enhance closeness to one another" (p.3). Of the 12 behaviors noted, the one considered by students to be the most motivating was humor.
Creativity
Humor can be of special benefit if the students are to engage in creative problem solving. “With the reduction of stress through laughter, there is more time and energy left to learn and create. The instructor and students feel a freedom that encourages divergent thinking and creativity” (Walter, 1990, p.44). Successful humor is often based on some deviation from what is expected. This is precisely the type of behavior that should be encouraged in creative problem solving. Ziv (1983) noted that “the presence of laughter tends to open learners to divergent thinking previously suppressed by the critical, traditional self. New, often unlikely and outrageous ideas surface in this kind of environment as the ‘fun mood’ increases creativity” (pp. 73-74). Edwards and Giboney (1992) cite a study where researchers tested college students’ problem-solving ability. One group watched a film on mathematics, while the other watched one on “broadcast bloopers.” The group that saw the humorous film demonstrated greater success in problem solving.

Cultural Contexts
Sense of humor, and the way one views his or her sense of humor, exist within the contexts of one’s culture. McDowell and Votsuyanagi (1996) found that a sample of students from a university in Japan rated themselves significantly higher on a measure of sense of humor than did students from a university in the U.S. This included “liking of humor, sensitivity to humor, and coping humor” (p.3), or how the “subjects make use of humor to cope with stressful events” (p.11). (It should be noted that the former group was enrolled in a psychology class, while the latter group was taken “from several scientific and technical communication classes” (p.7)).

Bryant, et al. (1980) found that how students react to a teacher’s use of humor is often affected by the sex of the teacher. By classifying humor as to whether it fit, or distracted from the learning topic, they found that, in general, students gave poor ratings on delivery, effectiveness, and appeal to female instructors who used distracting humor, whereas male instructors who used distracting humor were seen as more appealing. In general, however, more appeal was assigned to instructors (male or female) who used humor related to the topic. It should be noted that students also rated as appealing instructors who used hostile and sexual humor, which is not to say that such humor ought to be used in the classroom.

Using Humor
There are a variety of ways humor can be used by teachers and students in a classroom. Unfortunately, some of these can be cruel or detrimental to the social environment of the class. The Guideline for Equity Issues in Technology Education (Boben, 1985) asks technology teachers to “choose language and usage that do not offend people or reinforce bias” (p.12). Many do not realize that “offensiveness is not determined by the intent of the speaker, but by the listener” (Flowers, 1994, p.28).

But humor can be used effectively. Raeshide (1993) suggested seven guidelines for the use of humor in the classroom:

- First, teachers should be aware of and receptive to humor’s many uses, particularly those cited above.
- Second, humor should never be used to ridicule or embarrass a student.
- Third, humor should never be aimless; it should serve a specific purpose, even if it is used spontaneously.
- Fourth, humor should be made appropriate to the students’ ability levels.
- Fifth, teachers should reorganize the uses of spontaneous as well as planned humor; they should incorporate both into their teaching.
- Sixth, teachers should laugh at themselves occasionally to show their students that they are ‘real people.’
- Seventh, they should use sarcasm only if it is of the playful kind (pp. 26-27).

Dickmeyer (1993) made the following suggestions regarding using humor in the classroom:

- “1. Consider your presentations skills...” (p.11)
- “2. Consider your audience.” (p.11)
- “3. Consider your course materials...” (p.12)
- “4. Practice your humor on colleagues or family members” (p.13).

Humor in Technology Education
Technology teachers may wish to experiment with the judicious use of humor in their classrooms and laboratories, using it only where it proves beneficial. Humor that relates to the subject matter may be the easiest to use effectively and could become a permanent diversion in a class (using the same joke each time the class is taught.) For example, before discussing surveying in a construction class, I show my students an illustration of surveyors and people shoveling in a large field, with the caption, “Early work on the Grand Canyon” (Macaulay, 1987, Plate XI). Before students in a materials class write up their first experiments, we look at the experiment report titled, “The ability of woodchucks to chuck cellulose fibers” (Abrahams, 1998). In a class where the topic is creative product design, we look at the 16 different visuals of new ideas for bicycle design.
shown in The Catalog of Fantastic Things, including the “diverging Tandem” and the “Staircase-Climber” bicycles (Carelman, 1971). When discussing dimensions, I quote Steven Wright, “I’m not afraid of heights; I’m afraid of widths.”

However, teachers who use humor that does not necessarily relate to the topic at hand might still experience the benefits noted earlier. The Internet is one of many fertile sources of humor; however, many jokes, cartoons, and stories are clearly inappropriate for any classroom. Still, a teacher could read and listen to a wide variety of humor, selecting only those appropriate for his or her class, and possibly rewriting the humor so it is not as likely to offend.

While there are many forms of humor other than the joke, the following list of jokes was taken from two sources: a collection of Milton Berle’s jokes (Berle & Rosen, 1992), and the transcript of jokes from the radio broadcast of Garrison Keillor’s “A Prairie Home Companion Second Annual Joke Show” (MPR, 2000).

Teachers who use these and other jokes may wish to alter some terms so that male-female references are balanced. In addition, disparaging references to another may be turned toward the joke teller to avoid offending others, changing “He knows his job backwards. That may be the problem!” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 448) to “I know my job backwards. That may be my problem!”

**Construction**

“My house is a split-level. Of course, it didn’t start out that way!” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 322)

“A man walked into a hardware store and said that he wanted to see some wallpaper. After the clerk showed him several patterns, the man asked, ‘Can I put this on myself?’ The clerk said, ‘Yes, but it might look better on the wall!’” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 440)

**Communication**

“A super computer chip company became so successful it started to look for a smaller place!” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 276)

“Why do they put bells on cows? Because their horns don’t work.” (MPR, 2000)

“How many programmers does it take to change a light bulb? None—that’s a hardware problem.” (MPR, 2000)

“The best part about computers is that they make very fast accurate mistakes.” (MPR, 2000)

**Manufacturing, Invention, and Innovation**

“In Florida they use alligators to make shoes. It’s amazing what they can get alligators to do.” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 32)

“We’ve just come up with a new anti-anti-anti-missle. It has one drawback — it keeps shooting itself down!” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 352)

“If necessity is the mother of invention, how come so much unnecessary stuff is invented?” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 352)

“I have a friend who invented a brand new type of burglar alarm. Unfortunately, somebody stole it.” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 352)

**Transportation**

“About an hour after the flight started, the pilot announced, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I’m afraid we’ll have to slow down because of the loss of our number-one engine.’ A few minutes later, the second engine went out and a similar announcement was made. The plane would have to slow down more. Then the third engine went out. A passenger turned to the man next to him and said, ‘If that last one goes, we’ll be up here all night.’” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 29)

“Estronauts never get athlete’s foot. They suffer from missile toe.” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 58)

“What part of the car causes the most accidents? The nut behind the wheel!” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 65)

“Scientists have just laid out the flight schedule of our newest space probe. Of course, it starts out the usual way — an hour layover in Atlanta.” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 519)

“Did you hear about the restaurant on the moon? The food is terrific, but there’s no atmosphere.” (MPR, 2000)

**Work**

“He works eight hours a day and sleeps eight hours a day — the same eight hours!” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 365)

“My cousin just got a job replacing a machine that found the work too dull!” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 364)

“The closest he’ll come to a brainstorm is a slow drizzle.” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 211)

“This vacuum cleaner will cut your work in half.” ‘Good; I’ll take two of them.’” (MPR, 2000)

**Other**

“Farmer Johnson bought a state-of-the-art chainsaw that was guaranteed to cut down five trees an hour. The next day, Farmer Johnson was back in the store and explained that he’d only been able to cut down five trees the whole day. The salesman took the saw and pulled the starter cord. The resulting buzz was deafening. The farmer said, ‘What’s that noise?’” (Berle & Rosen, 1992, p. 352)

“Two cows were lying in a field. One of them says to the other, ‘So, what do you think about this mad cow disease?’ The other says, ‘What do I care? I’m a helicopter.’” (MPR, 2000)

“What is the difference between ignorance, apathy and ambivalence? I don’t know, and I don’t care one way or the other.” (MPR, 2000)
“Dad, I’m going to a party; would you do my homework for me? I’m sorry, kid, but it just wouldn’t be right. ‘Well, maybe not; give it a try anyway.” (MPR, 2000)

Recommenations
Many authors agree that there are significant educational benefits to using humor in the classroom. These may include reduced stress, increased motivation, less psychological distance among students and to the teacher, and increased creativity. While teachers should filter humor for offensiveness, it may be employed as a particularly effective tool in a technology education classroom.

References

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