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Joking apart: on the educative value of the humorous (0541)

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The use of humour and satire has a long cultural significance, with universal aspects (see McGraw and Warner, 2014). This paper reports on a small scale study with university lectures on developing 'serious joking', by this we mean the explicit development and use of jokes and joke telling as a pedagogic strategy. Whilst there has been some interest on the value of humour in the classroom (see for example an early study by Powell and Andresen, 1985), there has been substantially less interest in the construction and deconstruction of jokes to support students understanding of their subject area, and particularly its technical language. Let us take a well-worn example from my own original subject area, physics:

'Every couple has its moment in a field'

The statement would have had a slightly saucy natural reading, even if with slightly odd grammar. It has a limited chuckle value. For those with some education in physics it also expresses a particular physical principle. A couple, that is two equal and opposite forces acting on an object but not at the same point, cause the object to spin around a point. It spins and does not translocate due to the 'moment', and one cause of two equal and opposite forces of this type is due to the interaction of the object with a field (electrical, magnetic, gravitational). Now there are nuances on this joke, and much time is spent (amongst physicists) deconstructing such nuances which require greater and greater familiarity with theoretical ideas and the technical language of physics (oh, how we laughed at a string theory version of the joke!).

This project specifically developed McGraw's theory of joke structure, namely the 'benign-violation' model (McGraw and Warren, 2010). Following critiques of early theories of humour (superiority, relief, and incongruity theories), the benign-violation thesis argues that jokes emerge from the intersection of the violation of some rule or convention in safe contexts and circumstances. Thus, the violation is recognised as rule breaking and yet at the same time is benign to those involved; there is little risk to the individuals directly involved. For example, being tickled in public is a contravention of the usual rules of public behaviour. It is a violation, but in the right circumstances it can be humorous, that is when it is not deemed violent or inappropriate. The context and circumstances (including the relationship between the tickler and the ticklee) make the encounter benign (playful, even perhaps pleasurable). Thus, the project articulated four principles for the construction and delivery of serious jokes:

- That the joke should require some detailed knowledge of an academic subject
- That it should violate some norm, rule or principle commonly held in that subject area
- That it should be expressed, if possible, in subject specific terminology
- That its construction and the context in which it can be told would normally be perceived as benign by those involved

Five lecturers were recruited to be involved in this pilot phase of the project because of their initial interest and the promise of fortification by coffee and biscuits. The initial meetings were informal and playful including discussions of jokes we had, or now regularly used in our lectures (including the

failures). We began by considering both the idea of 'serious joking' as a distinctive pedagogical strategy and how this differed from our present practice. We also developed a broader, collective understanding of the four principles developed from the 'benign-violation' thesis. These initial meetings were both 'academic development' in the sense of colleagues considering the value of a novel approach to learning, and also 'research and inquiry' in recognising that 'serious joking' was an emerging field of interest and its value was yet to be ascertained.

Following these initial meetings the group 'workshopped' possible topics for jokes, and possible contexts in which we might support our students to write their own jokes. This led to two parallel inquiry processes: (i) how can lecturers develop serious jokes that facilitate student learning, and (ii) how can the construction of jokes by students facilitate their learning? Whilst this stage of the project was focused on the first of these, we recognised that monitoring our own journey of joke construction was an important insight into how we needed to support students in the process. The emerging jokes were field tested on opportunity samples of undergraduate students within the lectures specific subject areas. Students were asked to rate two jokes in terms of: intelligibility, humour potential, depth of subject knowledge required in order to understand the joke and appropriateness to the teaching context.

This paper reports on the outcomes of these initial studies, which, in broad terms, supported the hypothesis that serious jokes may have pedagogical potential. Of more significance, however, we report on the potential of the benign-violation thesis of humour for structuring academic development on the use of 'serious joking' on higher education.

References

McGraw, P. and Warner, J. 2014. *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*. Simon & Schuster: New York

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