

Humor as pedagogy: A geographical perspective

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Introduction

This article explores the intersections between pedagogy, geography, and humor. I have had a long-standing interest in cultivating an environment in my classrooms that allows room for humor and laughter, and my background as a geographer has encouraged me to consider the geographic aspects of humor in the classroom. Furthermore, my ongoing training in pedagogy leads me to consider how humor functions as a form of pedagogy, and indeed whether humor facilitates or rather interferes with the learning process.

Much of my approach to humor is personal, as I will discuss in more detail later. My first experience as a teacher was over 25 years ago as a preschool teacher in the U.S., working with three- to five-year-olds. Being humorous with this group was quite natural for me, but using humor in a university classroom is an entirely different thing. The relationship one has with a five-year-old is of course very different from that one has with a 25-year-old, from the teaching perspective. I have become increasingly aware of the need to critically reflect on the role of my humor in my teaching, so as to be clear about the risks and rewards of employing a “pedagogy of laughter” with my students. This article reflects the beginning of this process for me.

I will begin with a review of the literature on the pedagogy of humor, with a focus on the university setting. I will then discuss my own personal experience with humor in the classroom, with a focus on the geographic aspects of teaching with and through humor. I will discuss both successes and failures from my own experiences. I end the article by raising some questions that are worth further exploration.

Humor and pedagogy in the literature

The topic of humor in the classroom has been a rather contentious one over the years. A fair number of studies has been published, but most of these studies rely on small data sets, and much of this research is quite dated at this point, so the overall conclusions are not necessarily clear. Cause and effect relations are impossible to determine in much of this literature. As Ronald Berk (1996: 72) put it about 20 years ago, the literature on humor and pedagogy to that point was inconclusive and contradictory. That said, there does seem to be a consensus in recent scientific publications that humor can make a valuable contribution to university pedagogy. Much of the work on classroom humor has been focused on elementary and secondary education (e.g. Loomans and Kolberg 2002), but the focus here will be on studies involving university teaching.

Studies of humor and pedagogy find that humor’s positive effects are grounded in humor’s physiological and psychological effects on the body; that is, humor reduces anxiety, tension, and stress (Berk 2000). For Garner (2006), humor can increase moti-

vation and enhance self-esteem among students, enhance learning, and improve recall. Additionally, use of humor is something students often mention when evaluating teachers positively. Humor can foster mutual respect and increase student receptivity to material as well as improve content retention. At the same time, Garner (2006: 178) warns that the “use of humor can be complicated because it may be highly personal, subjective, and contextual and we cannot always predict the way it will be received.” A cautious, reflective approach is certainly warranted.

“Laughter receives high marks from teachers and students alike,” writes Korobkin (1988: 154), “because it unleashes creative thinking and reduces social distance.” In summarizing some of the benefits of humor thought to be experienced by students, Korobkin (1988: 155) points to increased “retention of material; student-teacher rapport; attentiveness and interest; motivation towards and satisfaction with learning; playfulness and positive attitude; individual and group task productivity; class discussion and animation; creativity, idea generation, and divergent thinking.” Humor can also decrease “academic stress, anxiety toward subject matter; dogmatism; [and] class monotony” (Korobkin 1988: 155). Berk (2000) argues that humorous items on exams may benefit students by making them more relaxed, potentially leading to improved performance. Ridanpää (2014a: 702) adds that humor can make “complicated or sensitive issues easier to comprehend and digest.” Beyond this, Korobkin also notes that humor (or lack thereof) can be used as a diagnostic. For example, “the absence of in-group humor and laughter in small group interaction may be an indicator of poor bonding....An alert instructor can observe class humor for determining or diagnosing the health of the groups” (Korobkin 1988: 155).

Only a few studies have investigated the gendered aspects of humor in the classroom. For example, Bryant, Comisky and Zillmann (1979), in a study with a small sample size, found that male teachers used humor more often than female teachers. In addition, about half of the male teachers’ attempts at humor were of a hostile/sarcastic or sexual nature (though the male teachers often directed sarcasm at themselves). In another study, Bryant et al. (1980) found that in student evaluations, the frequency of use of humor was positively correlated with the students’ evaluations of the teacher’s performance – but only for *male* teachers. For female teachers, there was no correlation between the frequency with which they employed humor and positive evaluations. The kind of humor also mattered:

For male teachers, the use of hostile or aggressive humor and nonsense humor was found to be associated with more positive evaluations of general teaching performance; the use of sexual humor and other types of humor was found to be positively related to appeal. Female teachers who employed hostile or aggressive humor, on the other hand, failed to benefit from it on ratings of overall teaching effectiveness, although their appeal proved to be significantly enhanced (Bryant et al. 1980: 516).

The authors caution, however, that they were unable to tease out cause and effect, and these results thus reveal only correlations. Clearly, this research is sorely outdated, as societal and classroom norms regarding appropriate behavior and standards of humor, as well as overall gender relations, change over time. Humor is indeed a “culturally perishable” phenomenon that is extremely sensitive to changes in time-space context, and thus we must be careful when attempting to make conclusions about the contemporary relevance of results that are decades old. Much work clearly remains to be done in this area.

Another relevant question relates to how much humor one should use in the classroom. How often should we, as teachers, try to get the students to laugh? Once again, the literature is rather thin, and the studies that exist come to different conclusions. Ziv (1981), for example, asserts that a teacher should not use more than three to four instances of humor during a one-hour class period. However, in a different study, Downs et al. (1988) compared the use of humor between two groups of university

teachers: nine “award-winning” teachers and fifty-seven teachers who had not won an award for pedagogy. The authors found that while the “average” teachers made attempts at humor 13.3 times per 50-minute lecture, the award-winning teachers used humor at about half that rate (7.4 attempts per lecture). This would suggest that the Swedish axiom *lagom är bäst* (moderation is best) is quite relevant for the use of humor as a pedagogical tool, but even here, the sparse literature can only be considered as suggestive and by no means conclusive.

While a few studies discuss the negative effects of humor in the classroom, on the whole the literature is quite optimistic about the potential for achieving positive effects in the classroom through the use of humor, and there are many books and articles that provide suggestions for teachers who are interested in consciously using humor as a part of their pedagogy. In my own discipline of human geography, however, the practice and implications of employing humor as a form of pedagogy have been largely ignored.

There does seem to be an increasing interest in humor in human geography, albeit from a very low level. Ridanpää (2014a, 2014b) provides helpful reviews of the state of the geographic literature on humor (this is humor in general, and not limited to the classroom setting). In recent years, humor has emerged as a topic of study especially in the field of popular geopolitics (e.g. Dodds and Kirby 2012; Dittmer 2013). But geographers have not had very much to say about the humor that takes place within the walls of the classroom. This lacuna is interesting, perhaps even puzzling, since there is much that could be said about the ways in which humor transforms the social space of the classroom, in both positive and negative directions. Perhaps geographers, like other social scientists, have found humor to be a topic less worthy of study, less “serious” from an intellectual perspective.

As for the studies that exist in geography regarding the pedagogical use of humor, beyond the discussions of the use of (humorous and satirical) cartoons in classroom instruction (Kleeman 2006; Hammett and Mather 2011), the most useful analysis is to be found in Alderman and Popke’s (2002) examination of the use of Michael Moore’s satirical television program *TV Nation* in their teaching. The value they see in humor is that it “can serve to disrupt taken-for-granted attitudes or understandings, and thus potentially help students see society and space in alternative and more critical ways” (Alderman and Popke 2002: 229). Beyond this, the authors identify a connection between humor and geography through a common association with politics. Alderman and Popke (2002: 231) raise “the possibility of a close relationship between the ‘politics of humor’ (which asserts that there are power relations inscribed in the production of humor) and the ‘politics of space’ (which asserts that there are power relations inscribed in the production of landscapes).” Thus the use of humor, especially with an attention to the politics that often lies behind humor, may help students make connections to the political processes that underlie the production of cultural landscapes. Furthermore, Alderman and Popke (2002: 234) argue that humor in the classroom can also “promote a critical awareness of complex social and geographical issues by fostering the cognitive flexibility of students.”

The authors also suggest that teachers “can use humor to convert our geography classrooms into public spaces for thinking and talking about the world in a critical way” (Alderman and Popke 2002: 228). This idea is worth dwelling on for a moment. The authors do not elaborate on whether humor is *necessary* to the creation of “public spaces for thinking and talking about the world in a critical way,” or whether such public spaces could be effectively created without humor. Certainly, the idea behind the assumption of the value of humor as a pedagogical tool is that it can help derail the students from their traditional linear thinking about a particular topic. Once they are bumped off the tracks, so to speak, they can begin to see the world in a new way. The risk for the teacher in this process, is that once we eject the students from the safety

and security of the rails, we cannot know precisely where they will land. We have no way of knowing what analysis or conclusions the public spaces we create for the discussion of our course topics will produce. As teachers, we may not consider this to be a problem, but we must certainly be prepared for its consequences.

Perhaps the best that can be said about humor in the classroom after this brief review of the literature is that it is a potentially powerful pedagogical strategy that should be carefully reflected upon by the teacher before, during, and after the teaching occurs.

Personal reflections on the use of humor in the classroom

In this section I will review some of the specific strategies that I use to incorporate humor in my teaching, with a focus on the geographic elements of humor. I do most of my teaching in one class, Political geography and planning (*Politisk geografi med samhällsplanering*), which is a lower-level undergraduate course that averages around 20 students. With regard to the reasons I employ humor, the most fundamental reason can be found at the personal level: for me, it's about being true to myself, my humor reflects who I am as a person, and relates to my understanding of what it means to be human. Flowers (2001: 11) argues that "teachers should laugh at themselves occasionally to show their students that they are 'real people'." I want students to be able to relate to me as a person, especially because some of the topics we discuss in the course (such as nationalism and racism) are very sensitive and require a considerable degree of openness and courage on the part of the students. Creating an atmosphere that emphasizes our common humanity is, I think, important in this context, and humor is one way to achieve this goal, particularly as it can be effective in communicating a sense of humility (as when I make fun of myself). This notion of humility is important for epistemological reasons, as one of my basic assumptions is that our knowledge is always only partial and provisional, and if we can keep this in mind it can be easier to understand the position of people who experience oppression (such as minority groups), even when members of the majority have difficulty seeing this oppression themselves. As Mayo (2008: 245) puts it, the use of humor in the classroom "is an invitation to think differently, from another perspective, while at the same time inhabiting one's own perspective; in other words, humor encourages one to learn."

I am also interested in using humor to weaken the teacher/student hierarchy, to level that relationship, if you will, but only to a limited extent. I do not want this leveling to go too far – in other words, I want to make the boundaries between us more permeable, but I do not want to erase them completely. I still want to retain some authority in my relationship with my students.

In addition, I see humor as a tool for holding the students' interest over time, over the course of a particular lecture as well as over the length of the entire course. The kind of humor I use is largely of the "high-risk" (i.e. spontaneous, ad-lib) kind, and rather less of the "low-risk" (planned) sort (Berk 1996). Low-risk humor, for Berk, is represented by written comments in syllabi, assignment instructions, and even exams, that attempt to be humorous. Also included in this category are jokes that a teacher shares at the beginning of a class session, amusing cartoons or photographs inserted into lecture slides, and other kinds of planned humor. I am personally not a joke-teller, and while I do use the occasionally funny cartoon or photo, I am more likely to inject humor into a lecture or seminar through a spontaneous comment, but usually one that has a pedagogic intent, especially when it comes to highlighting issues of geography.

Hellman (2007: 38) cautions that you need to know your audience "to know whether you can say something" humorous. We can think of this in part as a question of geography. As it happens, I have a very different geographic background than my

students. I grew up in the United States, on Long Island in New York State. So aside from any generational differences I have with my Swedish students, I face the basic fact of different frames of reference caused by our diverging personal geographies. The risk here is that if “you are speaking outside of a group’s frame of reference, the message and meaning will be lost” (Hellman 2007: 38). This means that many of the things I would naturally find funny and relevant to say in the course of a lecture or seminar would not likely be understood by my students because they did not grow up in the U.S. (even if they have indeed been exposed to an enormous variety of entertainment from the U.S.). The consequence of this is that the confidence I might otherwise have regarding the potential effectiveness of a particular humorous comment is significantly reduced.

At the same time, there are certain advantages to the difference in our personal geographies, as it allows me to act as an outside observer of Swedish society, and to that extent I might be able to get away with certain comments when a Swedish colleague might run into trouble for saying the same thing. Furthermore, I am of course technically an immigrant (*invandrare*), and I am happy to label myself as such. However, in Sweden, this term is commonly racialized, so when one says *invandrare*, one typically means a non-European person, even when that person was born and raised in Sweden. In my experience, many, if not most, white Swedes do not consider me to be an *invandrare*, because I am white and possibly also because I have a Swedish name and roots in Scandinavia. One could even go as far as to say that I am considered more Swedish than dark-skinned Swedes who were born and raised in the country. So my status is somewhat ambiguous, and I can use this ambiguity (or in-betweenness) to satirize the debate about immigration in Sweden. As Ridanpää (2014a: 705; citing Delph-Janiurek 2001) notes, humor “marks sensitive points in relation to the (re)construction of sameness, difference, and also betweenness.” I have the sense that using humor in this context creates a softer opening for a discussion of what is otherwise a rather sensitive topic in Sweden.

Another geographic aspect of humor relates to the fact that I often have students with roots in other parts of the world, given the significant percentage of the Swedish population that has immigrated to the country from distant lands. In some ways, I think this fact actually serves as a brake on certain kinds of humor, as the white Swedish students would then tend to hesitate to make humorous comments about other parts of the world if they know that some of the other students come from these places. In that case, any attempt at this kind of humor would likely be met with “unlaughter” (Billig 2005).

Two of the topics we discuss in the course are nationalism and geopolitics, and given the role of the U.S. in the world, we end up talking about the country of my birth quite extensively. Thus it is important to me that my students feel comfortable being critical of U.S. foreign policy, so I do not hesitate to poke fun myself at U.S. global leadership. By doing this, I hope to communicate the message that I will not be offended if they have critical things to say about the U.S. It is, in fact, much easier for me to target the U.S. with my humor in Sweden than it was when I taught in the U.S., as the students respond quite differently. A considerable percentage of my American students had the tendency to be offended by any attempts at humor that targeted a politician or party that they personally identified with. There is also a long history in the U.S. of discouraging “anti-American” statements, and satirizing the U.S. government might draw this very label, which is of course not the case in Sweden.

Another geographic aspect of the humor I use in teaching relates to the desire to problematize nationalism and the production of regional stereotypes. As Alderman and Popke (2002: 234) note, humor can be used “to challenge conventional ways of seeing the world,” including “regional perceptions and cultural biases.” When I discuss my own research on representations of the U.S. South in American national discourse,

I show short clip from the animated television series *Family Guy*, in which the main character, in a pure non sequitur, says: “Yeah, America’s great, isn’t it – except for the South.” The episode has absolutely nothing to do with the South, so I use this clip as a humorous illustration of “everyday nationalism” (Johansson 2013), in that it shows how the idea that the South is inferior is always in the background, ready to be used at any time in popular culture. Of course, this is a case not of *me* being funny, but of using a humorous piece of the popular culture to make a conceptual point.

So this is an example of using humor to highlight the process of reproducing regional stereotypes, and thereby potentially undermining their effectiveness. There are also risks to this strategy of satirizing regional stereotypes. As a new resident of Sweden I was curious about regional dialects here, and was frankly grateful that I had avoided learning to speak the language in Skåne (the few language courses I did take before I moved to Sweden were on Åland). The first few times I met new students, I would joke with them that it was lucky for me that none of them were from Skåne, because I have a hard time understanding what people from Skåne say. I eventually realized it was a bit risky to make that kind of comment to my students, as I could not necessarily count on them understanding that I was being ironic, so I stopped making that comment to my students. This turned out to be quite fortuitous, because it was not much later that a student came to me during the middle of the course to talk about her frustration with how people in Uppsala treated her – just because she came from Skåne. She said she was tired of the stereotypes and the jokes, and that she appreciated the discussion we had in the class about regional stereotypes, because she felt that this gave her a language to use to talk about her everyday experiences. If I had made that joke about Skåne in her presence, I would probably have lost her for good and contributed to her alienation at the university.

In addition to the geographic elements of my humor, I often use humor in the context of gender relations. For example, during a lecture on gender and planning, I present some quotes from the Swedish planner and intellectual Alva Myrdal, who during the middle third of the twentieth century was a powerful visionary and advocate for a strong government role in re-engineering Swedish social life for the betterment of society. There was a strong gender element in this social engineering, as the behavior of women was a particular target for Myrdal. I show the students a slide with a couple of quotes from Yvonne Hirdman’s (2010) work on the gendered nature of the Swedish *folkhem* (“people’s home”), and one of the quotes shows the comprehensiveness of this social engineering project: Swedish women were to be taught how to sleep, eat, have sex, give birth, raise children, manage a home, and dress. As a way to highlight the rather invasive nature of this project, I add (upon finishing reading the quote): “Actually, I could probably use a little help dressing myself from Alva Myrdal, quite often I’m on my way out of the house and my wife looks at me and says ‘You’re not planning to wear that today, are you?’, and I say ‘No of course not, I was just checking to make sure it still fits.’” This comment is also intended to highlight and poke fun at gender stereotypes.

Another of my attempts at humor in the context of gender relations did not work so well. During a seminar on the topic of gender and planning, the students presented plans for a fictional municipality in Sweden to improve gender equality in that municipality. One of the groups consisted of two women and one man. During the presentation of their plan, all three students spoke, but during the question and answer session that followed their presentation, only the male student answered the questions. As it was clear to me that the other students noticed this discrepancy, and given the topic of the seminar, I felt compelled to point out this gender imbalance, and I did so by saying: “It appears that we have a slight problem with gender equality within this group.” This was intended to be funny, but afterward I realized that it was very risky, as the comment could easily have been experienced as more acerbic than I had meant it to

be. Indeed, after the seminar ended, the two female students in the group in question approached me. They looked clearly bothered, and they said that they took my humorous jab personally, and they wanted to assure me that they contributed as much to the group's presentation as the male student. They interpreted my comment as suggesting that they had not done their fair share of work on the project. I felt rather guilty about this, and assured them that I was not making any kind of judgment on their contribution but rather highlighting the irony that a plan to improve gender equality was being defended exclusively by the male student. In retrospect, I might have chosen another way of bringing up this issue, a less risky way. However, I do think my intention was valid, given the seminar's focus on gender equality. And I suppose that in the end, I should take it as a good sign that these two students felt able to approach me with their discomfort. Had they left the room without checking in with me, that could have had quite negative consequences for their participation in the rest of the course.

Conclusion

I have discussed the positive and negative aspects of using humor as a part of one's pedagogic toolkit. While I would certainly recommend the use of humor, ultimately each individual teacher must decide whether and in what ways to implement a pedagogy of laughter in the classroom. The most important thing is that it is not forced, that it reflects the personality of the teacher, and is used in ways that the teacher is comfortable with.

I would like to close by raising a few questions that deserve closer examination. I do not have the space here to provide answers, even preliminary ones, to these questions, but they would be fruitful avenues of exploration in future research. In no particular order:

If inappropriate humor can make the classroom "into a place of alienation and inequality" (Layng 1991; Kehily and Nayak 1997; cited in Alderman and Popke 2002: 228), how do we know what kind of humor is inappropriate?

To what extent does the impact and function of the humor depend on the topic of the course? A statistics class provides a very different context for humor than a course in political geography, for example.

If we think of the classroom as a social space where the status hierarchies that are operative in the students' world can be an obstacle to learning, what potential does humor have to disrupt these hierarchies, and does this potential depend on whether the humor comes from the teacher or from the students themselves?

There are many other questions that are worth asking about the implications of humor in the classroom. We should not hesitate to investigate these questions with a critical mind, as we should be very clear about one thing: the fact that humor often makes us feel good does not mean that it is always desirable, or that it always leads to positive outcomes with respect to learning.

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