Some college instructors believe that the only way for students to take their education seriously is to be serious and solemn in the classroom. This often means creating a strict classroom environment built on discipline and hard work, perhaps with little or no room for discussion and laughter. However, the most effective instructors are those who engage their students in creative and interesting ways. One way to engage students is to incorporate humor into the college classroom. Humor has psychological, social, and cognitive (educational) benefits. Humor has the power to make instructors more likable, approachable, facilitate comprehension, increase attentiveness, improve creativity, and promote social relationships. Humor is an appreciated teaching tool for instructors to facilitate student learning if using it appropriately, constructively, and in moderation. This article briefly reviews how the use of various types of humor affects student learning, along with appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor at the college level.

The stereotypes of college instructors are someone who are quiet, intelligent, knowledgeable, but rather dull and dry (Ziegler, 1998). If college students look back on their educational career, they are likely to have experienced those dry, dull instructors that never seemed to smile or have fun. Instructors may have taken their subjects so seriously because that was how they were taught, or because traditional attitudes about the instructor-student relationship was a stern and professional one in order to invoke a sense of seriousness and maturity. Humor used to be regarded as a source of distraction that reduced classroom teaching efficiency (Torok et al., 2004). Yet, laughing in class does not mean students are not taking the class and subject matter seriously. Laughter implies that students are awake and listening to what instructors are saying (Weaver and Cotrell, 1987). Fortunately, students have ushered in a new era of respect, cheerfulness, and a joyful learning presentation (Check, 1997). Today, humor has a solid place in classroom lectures due to its many proven psychological, social, and cognitive (educational) benefits towards teaching (Torok et al., 2004).

When college students are asked to identify what makes a good instructor, among the first characteristics noted is a sense of humor. Students often remember their favorite instructors as being those who created a fun environment and made them laugh. Fun is one of the five primary needs of humans alongside survival, belonging, power, and freedom (Pollak and Freda, 1997). A survey of 923 college, high school, and junior high school students asked whether they preferred instructors who used humor in the classroom. Results have shown that 84% of these students truly enjoyed instructors who used humor in the classroom. Less than 1% of students have said that they preferred instructors who used no humor at all, indicating that humorless instructors are far less popular and appreciated (Check, 1997).

According to Shatz and LoSchiavo (2005), students expect college instructors to be boring and dull; yet, when instructors attempt to be humorous, they respect the
fact that instructors attempting to make the class and subject matter interesting. Online classes are usually perceived as distant and impersonal, but the use of humor can motivate and capture students’ attention and interest in learning new materials. When humor such as cartoons, self-deprecating jokes, and top ten lists are used in online courses, students have more interest and appreciation in the course (Shatz and LoShiavo, 2005). Students were randomly assigned to either a full-blown online course section or a humor-enhanced section. Results have indicated that students in the humor-enhanced section posted more comments on the discussion boards and participated more actively compared to humorless section of the same course (Shatz and LoShiavo, 2005).

Benefits of Humor

The appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor have psychological, social, and cognitive benefits (Table 1). Research studies on the benefits of laughter show that humor enhances students’ health by alleviating pain and psychological discomfort (Check, 1997; Ziegler, 1998). Laughter stimulates the cerebral cortex of the brain that improves mental and physical health. Laughing causes the diaphragm to massage the right side of the heart that releases endorphins, a natural pain-killer (Check, 1997). Students undergo a great amount of pressure in and out of school, and stress can lead to mental disorders such as anxiety and depression. Humor is a major psychological tool that can help students cope with stress, enhance their sense of well-being, boost self-image, self-esteem, self-confidence, as well as alleviate anxiety and depression (Check, 1997). A playful approach to problems can help reduce some fear and tension on students, proving that sometimes laughter is the best medicine (Check, 1997).

Moreover, humor serves social purpose at the college level. It can be extremely effective in building rapport with the students, which is important for encouraging a sense of trust (Pollak and Freda, 1997). Humor can be used to establish professional relationships between instructors and students by breaking the ice, reducing fear and tension, and revealing humanness (Weaver and Cotrell, 1987). Students would like to see their instructors as real human beings. A sense of humor breeches the gap between instructors and students, joining them in the quest for knowledge (Weaver and Cotrell, 1987). Humor sets the tone for a more relaxed atmosphere, which in turn creates a positive climate conducive to student learning (Weaver and Cotrell, 1987; Pollak and Freda, 1997).

Humor can be especially useful in teaching ‘dread courses’ which students often avoid due to a lack of self-confidence. These subjects frequently have been paired with negative feelings of failure and boredom due to harsh and difficult instructors. Students who are previously conditioned to dislike a certain course such as chemistry, engineering, statistics, mathematics, and research methods can learn to enjoy the subjects when they encounter instructors who change the tone of the instructional process from a negative to a positive one (Kher et al., 1999).

In addition, humor can have cognitive or educational benefits as well. The extent to which college students learn may depend on the frequency and amount of humor in the classroom (Check, 1997). Humor can facilitate student attention, motivation, and comprehension of the material. A light or humorous touch can capture students’ attention and make the lesson more enjoyable, interesting, and memorable (Pollak and Freda, 1997). Humorous breaks during a lesson can allow the brain to take a breather, so that it can more effectively process and integrate the information (Kher et al., 1999). Sometimes low self-esteem can inhibit students’ ability to take risks and learn beyond the scope of perceived competency. Taking themselves lightly and being able to laugh at themselves allow students to be more self-forgiving for...
Table 1

*Benefits of Humor on Learning from instructors’ perspectives.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Psychological (Students)</th>
<th>Social (Relationship with Students)</th>
<th>Cognitive (Educational)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Improves mental health</td>
<td>• Improves student morale</td>
<td>• Captures student interest</td>
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mistakes or blunders that might otherwise cause major embarrassment.

Using humor can encourage students to take risks despite incurring temporary academic setbacks; therefore, students are able to further engage in the learning process (Pollak and Freda, 1997). College instructors who constantly used jokes and anecdotes in his lectures enhanced a particularly dreadful subject. Not only do instructors use of humor increase students’ attentiveness, but it also boosted students’ self-confidence in the subject matter, and made them attempt harder because they would like to please the instructors (Pollak and Freda, 1997).

Humor assists in problem-solving situations in which students are encouraged to think creatively and to expand their methods of reasoning (Ziegler, 1998). Sometimes, throwing out an unexpected idea during a brainstorming session can inspire students to consider situations from different perspectives, which is the essence of creative thinking (Pollak and Freda, 1997). “The early bird gets the worm” is a common expression used to imply that an early start leads to success. However, a humorous spin on that expression is “The early bird catches the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.” This looks at the same situation from a completely different perspective, implying that it’s better to reap the benefits after the hard work is already done (Pollak and Freda, 1997). Using humorous or absurd examples can help students see problems from various angles (Pollak and Freda, 1997). Humor also allows the expression of ideas that would otherwise be rejected, criticized, or censored (Ziegler, 1998).

Researchers have documented a positive relationship between instructors’ use of humor and student evaluations of instructors’ skill in using humor in a variety of contexts. Instructors rated as having a high HO are perceived as more competent communicators and are more socially attractive to students than instructors rated as having a low HO. Students also report learning more from instructors with a high HO (Wanzer and Frymier, 1999). Students are more likely to attend class, pay attention, and ultimately learn more from high HO instructors than from low HO instructors (Wanzer and Frymier, 1999).

Torok et al. (2004) investigate the correlation between instructors’ incorporation of humor into their courses and judgment about instructors’ competence and effectiveness. They (2004) also examine whether students feel their learning experience has been improved when their instructors use humor. When students are asked whether they prefer their instructors to use humor in the classroom, 73% of students strongly agreed with humor being used in education (Torok et al., 2004). When students were asked whether they prefer their instructors to use humor in the classroom, 73% of students strongly agreed with humor being used in education (Torok et al., 2004). When students were asked whether humor helped them to learn material, 80% of students believed that humor helped them learn concepts better. When students were asked what kinds of humor they enjoyed in the classroom, they responded most frequently with puns, jokes, riddles, cartoons, sarcasm, metaphor, well as funny stories and comments (Torok et al., 2004). Students frequently mentioned that humor tends to decrease tension and course anxiety, increase classroom morale, as well as facilitate the understanding of principles, concepts, and relevant examples.

Drawbacks of Humor

While humor is widely recognized as having beneficial implications for student learning, it is important to recognize that some types of humor can be viewed as offensive and unfitting for a college classroom environment (Table 2). Wanzer et al. (2006) conducts an open-ended survey regarding appropriate and inappropriate uses of hu-
Drawback of Humor on Learning from instructors’ perspectives.

Table 2

Drawbacks of Humor on Learning from instructors’ perspectives.

Drawback

Degrading Remarks of Students (Unrelated to Course)
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Nationality
- Religion
- Creed
- Political party affiliation
- Sexual orientation or preference
- Student stereotypes
- College life stereotypes
- Intelligence
- Physical appearance
- Area of residence (type of neighborhood)
- Embarrassing stories
- Poking fun at mistakes and ignorant behaviors

Offensive Humor (Types)
- Sexual
- Morbid
- Vulgar
- Sarcasm
- Metaphor
- Cynical thinking

Excessive Humor
- Undermines the credibility of instructors
- Makes students feel self-conscious
- Makes students feel bored and/or frustrated
- Lose focus of instructional objectives

Student responses are compiled into four major categories. Appropriate types of humor tend to be course-related such as jokes on principles, concepts, examples, and media aides. Humor unrelated to course material such as harmlessly teasing students and college life stereotypes, as well as unintentional humor such as puns and slips of the tongue are also favored and appropriate.

Nevertheless, inappropriate categories include disparaging humor that are directed at students or poke fun of mistakes made by students (belittle jokes) and must also be discouraged in classroom (Wanzer et al., 2006). Disparaging humor may degrade students’ gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, creed, political party affiliation, or sexual orientation or preference, along with intelligence, physical appearance, and area of residence (type of neighborhood) (Wanzer et al., 2006). Inappropriate categories may also include offensive humor such as distasteful jokes that are sexual, morbid, or vulgar in nature (Wanzer et al., 2006).
Sarcasm, metaphor, cynical thinking, and poking fun at students’ mistakes and ignorant behaviors are inappropriate, and must be removed from the classroom because these types of humor belittle college students and make them feel self-conscious (Wanzer et al., 2006). Weaver and Cotrell (1987) warned against forced and excessive humor as well. College instructors should appear natural, not as though they are straining to make students laugh. Humor should be constructive and used in moderation. Excessive humor can undermine the credibility of speakers and have the opposite effect on student learning, making them bored or frustrated by the relentless string of jokes. Therefore, college instructors can easily lose course objectives and get sidetracked by string of unnecessary jokes.

Educational Implications
A major goal of college instructors is to facilitate and maximize student learning, as they become active seekers of knowledge. Another major goal of instructors is to have students not only enjoy the class, but also learn to truly enjoy and appreciate the subject matter. Enthusiastic instructors spend time thinking about ways to present course information in creative, interesting, and positive ways that will be memorable for students in many years to come (Pollak and Freda, 1997). For instance, instead of merely reading about the American Revolution, students can act out battle scenes between the American and British armies. This approach makes the project interactive and brings an element of fun to the lesson, instead of passively soaking in lengthy lectures. Instructional videos can be used to teach otherwise mundane subjects, such as School House Rock for grammar, Eyewitness Videos for science, Bill Nye the Science Guy, and The Magic School Bus for science. These instructional videos consist of funny characters, creative songs, and witty commentary. Both students and instructors can benefit from a fun environment where students not only enjoy the lesson, but are also encouraged to take risks and think creatively to solve problems.

Overall, humor is an appreciated teaching tool for college instructors, and is an integral component for student learning if instructors are using it appropriately, constructively, and in moderation. Humor has a psychological power to alleviate stress, tension, and depression, as well as elevate self-esteem. From cognitive or educational perspectives, the use of humor can also increase students’ interest, attention, motivation, and comprehension of the course material. By using appropriate types and moderate amount of humor in the classroom, college instructors can truly foster a positive climate that is conducive to student learning.

References
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