The Use Of Humor In The Classroom: Exploring Effects On Teacher-Student Immediacy And Student Learning

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THE USE OF HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM: EXPLORING EFFECTS ON TEACHER-STUDENT IMMEDIACY AND STUDENT LEARNING

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THE USE OF HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM: EXPLORING EFFECTS ON TEACHER-STUDENT IMMEDIACY AND STUDENT LEARNING

by

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THESIS

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Abstract

The field of education is constantly evolving; however, the goal of bridging the gap between teacher and student relationships remains the same. The focus of pedagogical theories is to inform and orient educators on how they can maximize the learning experience of their students through effective and constantly evolving teaching methods. Many studies have been conducted in regards to how educators can establish a positive learning environment while promoting solid comprehension and lasting retention of the material being taught. Among the methods being tested and practiced by educators is the use of humor (Garner, 2005) in order to achieve immediacy in the classroom. This study proposes that the use of humor can have a positive effect in the classroom by increasing the comfort level of students and raising the level of subject comprehension and retention of material, while increasing the interest level of subject material, increase overall learning, and enhancing students’ abilities to communicate the learned material. Using Microsoft Excel to organize data, a survey consisting of twenty seven closed-ended questions was administered to eighty public school teachers, in order to determine the relationship between the use of humor in the classroom and the two dependent variables measured in this study. The data revealed that instructors who reported using more humor in the classroom also reported being more effective teachers. They also felt closer to their students (i.e., immediacy). While this self-report data does not paint the whole picture of student learning, it nonetheless suggests that humor might help teachers reach students better.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Communication is a crucial part of our society. The transfer of ideas and information is what has allowed humans to evolve and accomplish feats that seemed impossible to previous generations. Individuals have countless thoughts and ideas, constantly racing through their heads. Due to the continuous flow of information through the human consciousness; including emotions and pre-determined scripts, many internal barriers exist for interpersonal communication (Warren, 2000) these are in addition to physical barriers such as distance, or cultural issues such as language barriers.

Physical barriers have a solution available through technological innovations. Telecommunication has helped bridge many gaps for long distance interpersonal communication. Technology allows for a person in any given part of the world to communicate with any other person, in any other given part of the world. Telecommunication tests boundaries, as well as the factors which at one point were considered to be essential components of interpersonal relationships. Teleconferencing, which is defined as a meeting held between people in different locations through the use of telecommunication devices (Dictionary.com, 2005), has transformed offices, training rooms, and classrooms. Teleconferencing allows teachers to “Tele-video conference with another class a couple of miles away or on the other side of the world” (McPherson, 2005).

This means that with the proper equipment, not only is the location of the students extremely flexible but so is the location of the instructor. In his 2005 article, McPherson commented on an occasion when he was on a trip outside of North America, where he teleconferenced with his colleague’s classroom over his laptop and answered questions about video conferencing. The possibilities of telecommunication are endless. People in low income
or rural areas, with the right equipment, can receive the same level of education that a person would in an urban or higher income area. The bar can be raised on the level of qualifications that school teachers are required to have, because teleconferencing will increase the amount of people that qualified teachers can reach. Cultural differences can also be bridged through technological innovation. It has been suggested that technology will increase society’s awareness of other cultures, languages, and social possibilities, due to the interpersonal connections that people are developing through new forms of communication (Gergen, 1991). Even when distances are bridged, other conceptual barriers often times exist, which need to be addressed in order to establish sound communication. When attempting to overcome barriers, one must consider barriers other than physical ones (Warren, 2000).

Ethical boundaries, for instance, must be respected, in order to display the proper amount of sensitivity and not have the opposite effect by establishing yet more barriers. Some groups are more sensitive to certain standards than others. Certain tools, like humor, aimed at breaking down barriers of communication can have the adverse effect and raise even more barriers between individuals, because of certain sensitivities. Several studies have examined these standards, for example, a study by Brown and Choong that included a total of four hundred and eighty three students from two east-coast universities. Two hundred and thirty one students were from a state school, and two hundred and fifty two were from a private Catholic school. The hypothesis of this study predicted a higher level of ethical awareness at the Catholic school than at the state school, due to the fact that more ethics courses are offered and required at the Catholic school than at the state school. The subjects were asked to answer whether or not they had participated in one or more of sixteen “dishonest academic practices” (Brown and Choong, 2003). The results suggested that there was no difference in the amount of academic dishonesty
between the two universities; in fact it existed at both locations significantly (Brown and Choong, 2003). Brown and Choong suggest that perhaps the teaching of morals in the Catholic university is too general or too specific in order for these students to apply the same principles to their studies. At the same time, there is not enough of an emphasis on ethics at the state school. These differences in standards create barriers that need to be overcome in order to achieve effective communication. Communication depends greatly on the reception of information, and in order to overcome factors that get in the way, strategies are created to help people learn through sound communication.

With all of the processing of information that is present in the human consciousness, the orderly and effective process of learning is a difficult task, to say the least. Pedagogy theories attempt to utilize effective methods of teaching, in order to facilitate the learning process for teachers and students who are on both ends of the education process. According to Holberg and Taylor (2012), pedagogy is where researchers study how educators carry out the learning process. In other words, it is theory in practice. Pedagogy theory examines how things will actually be carried out in a classroom, between the student and the teacher. Communication is vital in the education process, because one cannot learn if the material cannot be transmitted efficiently between the educator and the student. There are several different types of pedagogy theories in the field of education that attempt to establish sound communication in order to run a classroom efficiently (Borisoff & Hahn, 2009).

There are certain schools of thought that stand out in certain fields, like the Socratic method in law school or clinical rounds in medical school (Goodyear, 2007), in which the barriers of communication between teacher and student are blurred in order to achieve ultimate effectiveness in the learning process. These methods of teaching are considered the standard
when it comes to that particular area of the discipline. These predominant pedagogies are known as signature pedagogies (Goodyear, 2007). Shulman (2005) characterized signature pedagogies as practices, which include engagement that leads to instructor-learner dialogue; uncertainty, because the outcomes of the process are based on the development of the interaction; and formation, meaning that the students’ thoughts are made clear to the instructor.

The goal of all pedagogical methods is to increase the effectiveness of the teacher in the classroom in order to achieve common goals between themselves and the students. These goals can mean different things for individuals, for instance, student retention of taught material, and overall learning in the classroom, as well as an increased interest in the subject at hand. These goals require sound communication between the teacher and the student. A struggle exists when a student audience has to be convinced to trust the instructor and open up to the intake of information while successfully reporting what has been learned. Sound communication doesn’t always come easily, and therefore pedagogical strategies can help individuals who are trying to implement sound communication in their classrooms (Wood & Lenze, 1991).

Some studies have suggested that the way to establish sound communication in order to create a productive classroom environment is to make the learning student centered. Student centered pedagogies suggest that the curriculum should be based on students’ individual interests through various activities (Tzuo, 2007). These strategies are opposed to the alternative teacher based pedagogies, in which the students’ exploration is controlled completely by the teacher (Tzuo, 2007). The goal of student centered pedagogies is for the teacher to be effective at creating sound communication in order for them to reach common goals. Sound communication is crucial in the learning process, and in order to achieve effective communication that leads to
the accomplishment of goals. In settings such as the classroom, student centered pedagogies help teachers to overcome barriers and establish immediacy.

Teacher immediacy is a theory that has attempted to break down the barriers between educators and students in the classroom. Teacher immediacy can be defined as behavior that reflects a more positive attitude of the sender to the receiver (Andersen, 1979), which normally takes place by achieving a decreased physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and students (Gorham & Zakahi, 1990). The line of research that has dealt with immediacy has attempted to find factors in teacher student relationships that help to accomplish this difficult feat. Many attempts at achieving immediacy between students and teachers have been examined in pedagogical research. Some studies have examined the yearning for companionship as a tool for achieving immediacy in the classroom, through an educator taking the role of a friend or person who is not there to judge but facilitate student success (Sibii, 2010). In other words the barriers that exist between the student and the teacher can be broken down by developing a true friendship between the two parties involved. Other pedagogical approaches attempt to build this feeling of immediacy through other appealing factors, such as the use of technology (Alison 2008). The most important part of education is the delivery, which is why pedagogical strategies are so widely examined. The use of technology has shown to help achieve high levels of immediacy between educators and students that have been exposed to highly advanced technological methods of information presentation, like virtual reality (Alison 2008).

Some researchers would argue that it is not necessary to have fancy tricks for developing student/teacher immediacy, but rather that the simple use of an interpersonal communication tool can prove to be enough. Laughter is an easily accessible tool that can be used to break down barriers of communication for educational purposes. Paulo Freire labeled his pedagogical
approach as fueled by laughter and good times; “It’s necessary to laugh with the people because if we don’t do that we cannot learn from the people, and in not learning from the people we cannot teach them” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 247). Joke telling and laughter has been deemed as an integral part of critical pedagogy, which aims to redistribute the teacher student relationship’s established barriers (Lewis, 2010).

Humor has been identified as a factor or behavior that helps to achieve a productive level of immediacy between educators and students (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). The educational process is difficult, due to the numerous barriers that students and teachers face. These barriers include lack of information retention, lack of interest in the subject at hand, and an uncomfortable learning environment. Immediacy in the classroom, if achieved, will aid in diminishing these barriers. Humor is a tool that can be used to attain these goals, and its effectiveness will be explored in this study. The use of humor can lead to common goals between teachers and students, and because of this reason, this study will also explore whether a higher self-perception of teacher effectiveness can be achieved through the use of humor in the classroom.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

What is Humor? “Humor” comes from the Latin word *humorem* which means fluid or liquid (Matin, 2007). The meaning of the term in English has evolved through the centuries. Humor is a concept that is not easily defined due to its complexity. Its meaning can change from context to context, according to the situation and the perspectives of the parties involved. A clichéd definition of humor is anything that makes others laugh, because it is considered humorous by those particular individuals. Humor is defined as “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating something that is comical, amusing, or absurdly incongruous” (Merriam-Webster, 2007). Rieger and Ryndak (2004) describe the uses of humor in several ways, from a means of releasing negative emotions to a means of learning, or an expression of freedom (Rieger & Ryndak, 2004). There are three basic types of humor: verbal, visual, and physical (McCauley, 1983). Verbal humor involves the use of words and it can be found in such things as puns, jokes, and witticisms. Visual humor involves the use of images as seen in cartoons and in the physical appearance of some comedians. Physical humor relates to the use of actions, which could include wild actions such as pie fights or chase scenes (McCauley, 1983). The ability to use humor is often seen as a virtue (Basu, 1999). For operational purposes, humor will be defined as a quality that makes a situation amusing (Steele, 1998). General amusement is synonymous why a feeling that causes or can cause laughter (Steele, 1998).

Humor is a powerful tool that can aid in communication, from the advertising and marketing of a product, to an effective management and education tool. Ultimately teaching is the management of people, in order to arrive at a common goal. Effective management is ultimately the ability to convince people (Rubin & Martin, 2009). How does one convince
people? One must appeal to the audience at hand. Everyone is different; therefore, many factors must be taken into account when considered in determining what kinds of humor can appeal to particular people, and why. An individual’s response to an advertisement that attempts to use humor as its hook points towards the effect that humor will have when used to aid in communication with that individual. If an individual has a positive response to the humor used in an advertisement, then the intent of convincing a person to act in a certain way, or look at things in a certain way through the use of humor, will more than likely be a success as well.

Several factors can contribute to differences in the effect of humor on an individual. Certain groups are more likely to respond positively or negatively to specific types of humor. Joking within relationship has proved to help individuals be included in certain social groups (Graham, Papa & Brooks, 1992). Advertisements are a good way of seeing the effect that using humor as a form of appeal will have on different types of individuals.

Sternthal and Craig conducted a study in 1973 on the usage of humor by evaluating earlier literature on the usage of humor in advertising; it opened the way to future studies for the usage of humor in communication. In 1974, a study by Markiewicz suggested that 42% of humorous advertising was already being used in both television and radio. He reviewed 28 humor studies in communication, speech literature, and psychology, finding no compelling evidence of the positive effects of humor in advertisements (Zhang, 1996). In the end, previous studies have been inconclusive and mixed at best in declaring that humor does in fact help advertising and purchase intention (Chung & Zhao, 2003).

Differences in the factors that contribute to a positive or negative response to humor have to do with the variations in ethical awareness by individuals. Ethical awareness training can help to make individuals more conscious of others’ sensitivity in the workplace, this can lead to
increased production. In the classroom, increased production means that students and teachers alike are accomplishing their common goals through a successful learning process. Humor has also been proposed as a good tool for training individuals on ethical standards.

Jim Lyttle conducted an experiment in 2001 that explored the use of humor in persuasive messages for business ethics training. His experiment consisted of one hundred and forty eight students from an introductory business class at a large Canadian University. The “Ethics challenge”, which is used to train employees at Lockheed Martin, was used for the study. The basis of the research was that a good mood was set by using humor. The goal of the training was to get employees to call the “Ethics Hotline” when faced with any situation that they were unsure of. The results of this study showed that the use of funny cartoons and sarcastic remarks together were quite an effective method of training (Lyttle, 2001). In other words, it is important to experiment with new methods of persuasion in order to get the message through to the participants of educational as well as other professional organizations.

As a matter of fact, it is dangerous to not try new things, because old methods will usually become outdated and obsolete. For instance, it is believed that higher learning institutions that still apply principles of management and leadership skills that used for many years, face an uncertain future unless they adapt to new styles and methods (Talley, 1997). In a 1997 article by F.J. Talley titled “Ethics in Management”, the author mentions that not only does the new framework for ethical management training need to evolve in order to adapt to a constantly changing environment, but that the entire “framework for ethical practice” needs to adapt by including respect for autonomy, doing no harm to anyone, benefiting others, being just, and being faithful.
Humor can be the tool that facilitates new methods of learning, in order to achieve common goals. Ethical boundaries must be considered when using humor since the use of humor can also have an adverse affect on people. This is most apparent when humor is used to reinforce negative social situations, such as racism and other negative stereotypes (Beilke, 1998). Training on ethical awareness will only take us so far, because individual differences will also play a part in the effect that an attempt to appeal through the use of humor will have on a person. How then can one explore the reaction that individuals will have to different types of humor appeal?

Advertisements are a good way of seeing the effect that using humor as a form of appeal will have on different types of individuals. For instance there are gender differences when humor appeal is applied to the sexes. Men generally tend to find humor in advertisement more amusing than women do (Perry, 2001). On the other hand, women find humor appeal communicated by other women to be more humorous than by any other means (Perry, 2001). Men enjoy humor appeal with sexual and or aggressive themes (Martin, 2007). Women enjoy humor with a nonsensical point of view, or humor that is less forceful and blunt than what men tend to like (Martin, 2007). However, as with the studies of humor itself, it is important to note that there is no solid evidence that these reactions and preferences are universal for every man or woman (Martin, 2007).

There is no one single theory to support why humor is effective. Rather, there are multiple theories that try to explain why humor is an effective form of appeal, akin to arousal, incongruity, and reversal appeals. Past studies have come up empty-handed when trying to resolve this issue. Theories do exist and attempt to conclude why we respond positively or negatively to humor. For example, Freud's Relief Theory associates a release of energy. Relief Theory describes this energy as a safety valve for forbidden feelings. Therefore, humor is seen
as a healthy behavior (Freud 1905:1960). Additionally Superiority Theory, originated by Plato, claims that laughter is the result of feeling superior to others, through the use of jokes, and puns (LaFave, 1972).

As mentioned before, there are three basic types of humor: verbal, visual, and physical (McCauley, 1983). There are however, other conditions added to the verbal, visual or physical stimuli which contribute to their being humorous. In order to determine what is involved in humor and why some things are funny and others are not, it is necessary to turn to the theories of humor. For example Brown (2005) uses the factors involved in superiority theory in order to explain how three different classical theories of humor and laughter are attributed to the difference of laughter amongst oneself, or the laughter of others. When one thinks about humor, it is possible to think of laughing at the mistakes of another, laughing to relieve stress, or just laughing at something funny in general. The use of humor for any type of gain is not always welcomed with open arms. Brown (2005) explains that humor used for such gain would have to express the difference in laughter between oneself and the other, in terms of sufficient evidence of laughter. If one person laughs at something funny and the other person laughs at the person laughing (Brown, 2005).

The theory of superiority explains that a positive encounter can cause any one person to laugh, although this stops shy of understanding the real notion of superiority. Humor has a long history of benefits; however, the validity of humor used in different formats remains a target of investigation through superiority theory (Lowis, 2003). Lowis also explains that superiority theory is similar in nature to disparagement theory, where the two understand the assertion of laughter between the self and the other. Individual attitudes regarding humor are sometimes aggressive in the fact that one person may be ridiculing the other to gain an advantage through
specific actions. The individual on the receiving end is abused to gain popularity through a specific word, action, or even commercial (Lowis, 2003).

Communication researchers have discovered that humorous advertisements gather more attention and stimulate a liking to that particular ad (Speck, 1991). Approximately 10-30% of advertisers use humor in one form or another in the ads that they show (Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell, & Parsons, 1995). This illustrates that advertisers do in fact consider that humor influences advertisement effectiveness (Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell, & Parsons, 1995). The idea behind this is that humor influences the human mind to look at the ad and or the product more favorably. On the down side, there is no widespread research stating that humorous communication with an individual or audience is more persuasive than non-humorous forms (Martin, 2007). Perhaps this is because of other types of appeals that are used in its place.

When an advertisement is made more humorous, it does not automatically make it more persuasive (Martin, 2007). Humor has more to do with receiving a positive attitude towards a subject, than understanding what the topic is about. It tends to put a positive attitude into the audience making, them more receptive towards the advertisement. Once they are receptive towards the advertisement, this is when humor appeals in the advertisement plays a role in grabbing the person’s or audience’s attention (Martin, 2007). When humor is used correctly in a humorous ad, memory recall is strengthened in regards to what the product was (Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003).

When humor is used, it has positive effects on arousal. It boosts interest in the item due to the humorous clout surrounding the informational narrative. Humor is much more likely to be revisited and cross-examined than non-humorous material (Martin, 2007). The increased
attention will allow the user greater opportunity to process the information that is being broadcast to him or her (Cline, Altesch, & Kellaris, 2003). The manner in how humor is used and what type of good is being advertised play a significant role in how it is received by the audience and or the individual (Cline, Altesch, & Kellaris, 2003).

Humor reception varies from one person to the next (Underwood & Shaughnessy, 1975; Zhang, 1996). There are two distinct types of individuals who respond to humorous appeal. One set of individuals cross-examines the ads shown through meticulous analyzing, solidifying their attitude about the subject at hand (Zhang, 1996). While other individuals do not think about the subject at hand, instead taking the humorous appeal for what it is because of its likeable cues (Zhang, 1996). This is the case where the individuals take a more humorous position towards the subject at hand (Zhang, 1996). Mitchell and Olsen (1981) recognized that if individuals held a favorable attitude toward the delivery, they might then be fond of the subject as well.

Several studies have examined how the effectiveness of humor can help to achieve high levels of effective interpersonal communication, which leads to positive situations between parties such as teachers and students. Humor has been known to serve a variety of functions in interpersonal communication (Graham, Papa & Brooks, 1992). In order to consider its effects as a tool for interpersonal communication, one must consider the positive and dark side of humor. Humor can serve as method of transmitting verbal aggression (Graham, Papa & Brooks, 1992). Since humor can be used to induce both positive and negative social responses, significant results can result from a study that aims to assess separately, the inclination that individuals have towards using humor in its different varieties (Cann et al., 2009). Even though aggression is commonly seen as negative, it has been known to lead to others enjoyment, and has been known to develop a good sense of humor (Graham, Papa & Brooks, 1992). Due to these variations in
humor, it is important for communication researchers to come up with a way to properly measure the effects of humor in such a way that all varieties and differences involved in humor are considered.

One study found that in the interpersonal relationships where humor is effectively employed, many positive outcomes result from it (Cann et al. 2009). At the same time, this study goes on to make the claim that certain types of humor are not only positive but can also be identified as negative and can be used in ways that are hurtful in interactions. The difference between positive and negative forms of humor are recognized and supported through empirical and theoretical research. It is important to find out if the differences between positive and negative humor are being captured by instruments designed to assess humor uses in communication. Because individuals demonstrate different reasons for using both positive and negative types of humor, it is clear that negative uses of humor have a different effect on interpersonal situations than that of positive humor. A study of positive and negative styles of humor by Cann al. (2009), compared two measures that vary in their approach to assessing differences in humor styles as a way to assess the utility a broader view of humor styles provides. Their findings showed that there is a consistent overlap between the two measures, indicating to researchers the difficulty in differentiating the effect and intent between positive and negative styles of humor.

Even though someone has to be on the receiving end of the humor, the framework of Walker and Avant sees humor as positive in nature, and claims that it can be quite useful when attempting to educate people (cited in Sheldon, 1996). Academic researchers have studied the effects of humor and found that humor causes the person to pay more attention (Speck, 1991). While further examinations into the effects of humor, have shown it to make the response
memorable and likeable (Rossiter & Percy, 1997). Humor appeal is one of the most underappreciated forms of delivering a message (Sutherland & Sylvester, 2000).

In addition to promoting superiority, according to Zhang and Zinkhan, the subject that humor is being used to promote, should possess the quality of being humorous (Zhang & Zinkhan, 2006). This possession of humor serves as evidence of the quality of the subject at hand. Zhang and Zinkhan explained how the quality of the argument reflected in the degree of humor (evidence) is essential to attitude change (Zhang & Zinkhan, 2006). The more humorous the delivery, the more likely the viewer is pushed toward the directed message. This method is seen in many forms of media like cartoons, films, and stand-up comedy. Attempts to influence through the use of humor that fail to execute this feeling are seen as weak and irrelevant (Zhang and Zinkhan, 2006).

Many factors affect a person's sense of humor, which is why we don't all laugh at the same things. In a philosophical context, the superiority theory of humor offers revealing insights into human nature, the role of humor in society, and the various psychological factors that play a primary role in determining what human beings consider humorous, thus providing a distinct emphasis and perspective (Spotts, Weinberger & Parsons, 1997). There are other conditions added to the verbal, visual or physical stimuli which contribute to their being humorous. In order to determine what is involved in humor and why some things are funny and others are not, it is necessary to turn to interpersonal communication theories that attempt to make sense of this intangible phenomenon.

One must be a good listener during a conversation in order to pick up all of the signals that are being passed back and forth between individuals that are attempting to communicate.
interpersonally. Conversational sensitivity is a skill that results from being able to have awareness of minute verbal and nonverbal aspects of conversations that are ignored by individuals who do not possess this skill (Merolla, 2006). The theoretical basis for the construct which defines this skill is based on Gibson’s (1966) framework of social affordances which holds that some perceivers are highly attuned to their environments and can successfully detect higher order structures. This keen sensibility for breaking down conversations makes individuals “savvy about social interaction” (Daly et al., 1987), meaning that they enjoy their ability to decipher subtle meanings in what others say through their special skills.

Conversational sensitivity is extremely important in determining one’s ability to possess humor orientation, while other factors play an important part as well (A. J. Merolla, 2006). These factors are classified as parts of Nonverbal Sensitivity. Nonverbal sensitivity is considered to be the ability to interpret others’ nonverbal behaviors, which is critical in social interactions (Burgoon & LePoire, 1999). The ability to read nonverbal components is especially valuable when messages conflict, since those perceivers often give more importance to the nonverbal aspects (Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967). According to Booth-Butterfield (1991), the use of proper social information processing is important for the successful use of humor. Nonverbal sensitivity is an important factor in determining social intelligence (Funder & Harris), which is indicative of an individual’s ability to use humor successfully.

The phenomenon of humor exists in the realm of interpersonal communication, which means that in this situation there is a sender and a receiver, and factors on both ends must be considered when figuring out what led to the success or demise of an attempt at humor. A.J. Merolla observes that if decoding ability is linked to the production of humor, then one might also expect a negative relationship between humor orientation and receiver apprehension.
Receiver apprehension is defined as the fear of misinterpreting, inadequately processing and/or not being able to adjust psychologically to messages sent by others (Wheeless, 1975). A. J. Merolla (2006) feels that since receiver apprehension is related to deficient social skills, it is plausible that it would be inversely related to humor orientation, since good humor orientation is related to positive social functioning.

Humor has been suggested to promote better comprehension, increased retention of material, and a more comfortable learning environment (Garner, 2005). A comfortable learning environment will help a student not to feel threatened when attending a classroom, and allow him or her to take part in a positive learning experience. Randy Garner states in his 2005 article titled ‘Radical Pedagogy’ that the use of humor as a pedagogical tool has been shown to reduce classroom anxiety, create a more positive atmosphere, as well as facilitate the learning process (Garner, 2005). Humor can reduce anxiety, help relieve stress, and increase mental sharpness (Cousins, 1991). These three factors can result in an increase of relaxation or comfort in an individual’s learning environment. The use of humor by teachers can increase student attention, reduce anxiety, improve critical thinking, enhance concept learning, and create a positive classroom environment (Garner, 2003). Certain students have reported that teachers who teach through the use of humor based strategies generate a less intimidating environment that is more relaxed and helps students to better listen (Garner, 2005). A twenty one year project stemming from 1969 to 2000 conducted by Bryant Jennings and Dolf Zillman resulted in the idea that when used properly, humor can improve the classroom environment and lower test anxieties (Stambor, 2006). The incorporating of humor in test items has been found to reduce the negative effects associated with testing situations (McMorris, 1985).
It has been suggested that the use of humorous metaphors and other strategies can “increase retention by as much as 40%” (Glenn, 2002, p.1). Humor provides students with added positive associations and they are more likely to remember information (Hill, 1998). According to Tel Aviv University Professor of Psychology Avner Ziv, humor was not only an attention-getter, but also a paradigm of associative learning (Ashkenazy, 2000). Ziv conducted a study which compared the scores on a multiple choice test of students who had been taught with the presence of humor and a group which was taught without the presence of humor. The results pointed out that the group that was exposed to the material in a humorous fashion achieved higher scores than the other group that was not (Ashkenazy, 2000). Ziv claims that humor can significantly increase recall of information when it is used appropriately (Ashkenazy, 2000).

Randy Garner points out that the use of humor allows students to more easily recall lectures of topics that are normally seen as boring or tiresome, such as a Statistics lecture (2005). Humor is useful for facilitating comprehension of the material at hand Gorham & Christophel, 1990). Students have been found to improve retention of material when humor-filled examples have been utilized by the instructor (Kaplan, Pascoe, 1977).

Often times the effectiveness of a teacher is directly based on the rate at which their students are able to retain information. Is humor a tool that is helping teachers to reach a high level of effectiveness? Based on previous findings this study will postulate that the use of humor is a factor that can have a direct effect on the level of effectiveness that a teacher can attain in his or her classroom. In line with this reasoning, the first hypothesis postulated in this project is:

**H1: The use of humor leads to high levels of self perceived effectiveness by teachers.**
This hypothesis implies that teachers who consciously use humor in order to aid in communication with their students, will have a self perception of high effectiveness with their students that is directly dependent on that teacher’s use of humor. The perception and measure of effectiveness are normally a result of sound communication. Good communication is achieved through the elimination of barriers that hinder the transfer and comprehension of information. The field of education has brought a great deal of attention to another field of research that is referred to as Immediacy, in order to examine factors that can help to break down barriers.

Immediacy is a movement in the educational research field that has attracted a great deal of attention, mostly because of a large number of studies that have found a positive relationship between teacher immediacy and affective learning (Gorham, Zakahi 1990). Teacher immediacy can be defined as behavior that reflects a more positive attitude of the sender to the receiver (Andersen, 1979), which is normally achieved by achieving a decreased physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and students (Gorham & Zakahi, 1990). According to research in the field of education, Immediacy is a crucial factor in student motivation. A study conducted by Andersen in 1979 suggested that teacher immediacy accounted for 14 to 46 percent of the variance in measures of student attitude and behavioral commitment in college classes (Gorham, Zakahi 1990). This means that students to a large degree base decisions about their academic careers on their connection to their educators. This research has been supported by the findings of Gorham’s (1988) study of teacher verbal immediacy in college classes, and Kelley’s (1988) study of verbal and nonverbal immediacy at the junior and senior high school levels. Immediacy has been said to be synonymous to liking, and has been referred to, by Mehrabian
(1971), as two sides of the same coin, meaning that liking encourages greater immediacy and immediacy produces more liking (Gorham, 1990).

According to Andersen (1978), interpersonal perceptions and communicative relationships between teachers and students are crucial to the teaching-learning process, and the degree of immediacy between teacher and students is an important variable in those relationships (Gorham, 1988). Teacher immediacy behaviors, have been found to be directly associated with cognitive learning at the college level (Gorham, 1988). Teachers who express positive results of on-task behavior are perceived as more immediate; as compared with using negative consequences for not being on task (Gorham, 1988). The relation of the reinforcement of positive behavior and teacher immediacy points out the idea that encouragement of a student by an educator is an effective way of achieving a good level of teacher immediacy.

A positive correlation between behaviors that promote physical and psychological closeness, between an educator and a student, and learning results has been indicated by many studies (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). Teacher immediacy is synonymous with these types of student teacher relations, and important connections between teacher immediacy and affective learning have been found (Gorham and Christophel (1990). Affective learning can be defined as the learning of likes and dislikes (Purkis, Lipp 2000). The preceding studies have described certain behavior that promotes teacher immediacy; one of these behaviors is the use of humor (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). Due to these indications, the use of humor in the classroom has been classified as an important factor that helps lead to teacher immediacy (Gorham, 1988).

Cosner (1959, p. 172) proclaimed that “laughter and humor are indeed like an invitation, be it an invitation to dinner or an invitation to start a conversation: it aims at decreasing social distance”, which according to the definition, would be an increase in teacher immediacy. The appropriate
use of humor should have a positive impact on interpersonal relations and group cohesion (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). According to research, there is evidence that indicates humor is capable of reducing negative affective states (Smith, Ascough, Ettinger & Nelson, 1971); improving student perceptions of the teacher and facilitating teacher/student rapport (Linfield, 1977; Welker, 2977); and enhancing perceptions of competence, delivery, and appeal (Bryant & Zillmann, 1983); perceived intelligence, friendliness, as well as character (Gruner & Lampton, 1972). Based on previous studies, one can assume that the use of humor in the classroom by teachers will lead to a level of immediacy between their students’ and themselves. Keeping in line with this school of thought, the second hypothesis of this study will be:

\[ H2: \quad \text{The use of humor in the classroom leads to perceived immediacy between teachers and students.} \]

This hypothesis implies that the use of humor has led to positive results for teachers that have been able to effectively employ this tool for communication. The setting for this study needs a stage that involves both parties. A public school is an ideal setting for a study of this nature.
Chapter 3: Methodology

A classroom is a stage, with a forced live audience. Any performer can attest to the fact a stage can be the most fulfilling platform in life, as well as the most demanding and taxing test known to man. The reason that a stage can cause this much pleasure and grief is that it is a “give and a take” in which the exchange rate is not predefined, but rather is determined through a sale. A performer is nothing more than a leader, with no different purpose than a shepherd or a president, in that they have to convince the audience to follow them on a journey that is aimed at a reward. The intended destination of a successful leader in this case is scholastic achievement for his or her audience of students.

As a public school teacher, who began a career in education without much training or idea as to what tool was going to help lead a reluctant audience, I had to let the process influence me as a natural progression. At first I tried to mimic colleagues whose personalities could not have been any more different than mine, and I quickly realized that pretending to be something one is not is an ineffective form of leadership. I began to feel as though I had made a bad career choice, since my effectiveness as a teacher was dismal at best. I then thought of former teachers from my school experience, or trainers and mangers at the various employments I have had, that had an impact on my attention span when I was a part of their audience. I also thought of entertainers and salespeople, who had convinced me to follow them, and one thing stood out from all of these individuals; they were funny! Then I started to think about how I broke the ice with people and made friends or appealed to the opposite sex and it seemed to always be through humor. Once I came to that realization, the decision was easy; I needed to make my students laugh!
Everything fell into place, I relaxed, my students relaxed, we communicated. It seemed as though the barriers that were standing between us, caused by my uptightness and their hesitance to open themselves up and lower their defenses, were not only vanishing, but were quickly forgotten. After I accumulated a couple of years of experience, the use of humor in my classroom became commonplace. My personal measurement of effectiveness as an educator was fulfilling, and I felt that I was able to honestly say that all of my students learned a lot from me and remembered me fondly.

I accumulated experience and gained certain accomplishments, like a high passing rate on standardized tests from the majority of my students, and great strides in levels of literacy from my struggling students. I was asked to become a mentor for many incoming teachers, in order to help them adopt practices that had proved effective for my own development. I recommended the use of humor, but soon felt as though I had misguided some of these folks, because it seemed to have a negative effect on their ability to run a classroom environment. At the same time, some of the teachers to whom I recommended the use of humor, benefited greatly and appeared to adopt the practice naturally. What was it about these individuals that was aiding or inhibiting the effectiveness of their use of humor?

During this time, I was pursuing a Master of Arts in Communication at UTEP, and was trying to come up with a topic for my Master’s Thesis. After considering a vast array of topics which seemed way too dark and serious, I decided to look into the use of humor in the classroom. As I began to review literature having to do with humor for communication purposes, I became increasingly interested in the area of humor research, especially in the area of education. I felt that stories of successful attempts at humor in the classroom were interesting as well as useful, regardless of the outcome. It seemed to me that the results of a qualitative study
would not be ideal for someone trying to figure out what tools to use for manipulating and audience. A quantitative study might be better indicative of behavior that would yield desired results. I felt that conducting a quantitative study would help lay the ground for future studies; that would provide the qualitative nature of humor situations through the accounts of specific instances in which the use of humor in the classroom had positive or negative results. The question then was; where to start?

**Study Design: Selecting a Location and Creating the Study**

I felt that a public school would be an ideal location where I could find a large population of individuals that have had experience in classroom situations. Luckily I was employed at a local public school called ‘Basset Middle’. In order to get approved by the IRB committee to conduct this research, I needed to first get approval from the school principal and the public relations department of the EPISD. I then had to request permission from the public relations department. The idea seemed like a good one to me; however, colleagues and classmates seemed to view the venture as a process that would obligate me to jump through a series of tedious bureaucratic hoops in order to carry it out. The first step was to clear the topic with my thesis advisor, Dr. Sam Riccillo, who helped convince me that a quantitative survey study would be a good catalyst for this project and future studies. He pointed me toward a couple of communication researchers, who were studying several pedagogical theories for improving classroom instruction. One theory that immediately jumped out at me was Immediacy Theory.

To my understanding, the theory of immediacy took a complete communication based approach by attacking barriers of education between students and educators. I was hooked. Never before had a concept instantly began to make sense for me, a previously unexplained process. The reason I had success in my classroom was because of the absence of
communication barriers between students and me. Interpersonal relationships are constricted by the commonplace barriers that exist, due to many reasons, such as social norms and personal insecurities (Warren, 2000). These barriers are evident in settings such as the workplace, social gatherings and any public stage. However, in my opinion, the classroom is the most susceptible to these obstacles.

The teacher/student relationship is often limited by communication barriers that exist due to too many reasons. In my experience as a student, the idea that an instructor’s job is to evaluate students from a position of authority, creates a feeling of impending judgment and leads one to take a defensive stance on any interaction with the teacher that is at times terrifying and can be paralyzing to the voyage towards a productive and fruitful learning environment. How then did I break down these barriers? Humor! Humor has been a lifelong tool that helped me to make friends as an overweight child. Humor had started and strengthened relationships as an adolescent, and as an adult. Humor had been the tool that I utilized to knock down the wall that existed between the inexperienced educator that I was at the beginning of my teaching career and a student body already set into a firm defensive stance.

My thesis adviser recommended that for a project such as this, I should borrow an instrument from a previously published study so that it would already be a formulated and justified measure. The issue was that there did not seem to be one that tested both the theory of immediacy and the use of humor in a classroom setting. The solution was to combine two separate instruments into one closed-ended survey that measured all responses through a likert scale measure. Joan Gorham (1988) created a survey that measured the effectiveness of educators based on Immediacy Theory, while Lance Askildson created a survey that measured the effectiveness of humor and certain personality traits which may have led to the level of
effectiveness that the use of humor had in their classrooms. After combining both instruments, I added a series of open ended demographic questions that included the participant’s age, gender, and teaching experience. My final instrument was then complete, and consisted of twenty seven closed-ended questions and three open ended demographical questions.

At this point I had a survey and needed to quickly decide who my population was going to be, and decided that the best place to conduct this survey would be at the school campus of Bassett Middle School where I work, with the EPISD, the biggest employer in the city of El Paso, Texas. The range of age and teaching experience was wide among my colleagues, making this campus a good place to gather data. I put together a presentation for my school principal, Mark Brooker, who liked to fancy himself an effective communicator, teacher, and at times amateur comedian. With his approval, I was then directed to the public relations department at the EPISD central office, which included a copy of the survey and a power point presentation that included the main points of the study, signed letters from my advisor and my school principal, along with my teaching credentials. The project was approved by the public relations department and apparently the hoops I had to jump through, ended up not being as tedious as previously described by individuals with strong opinions about the process. My next step was to get approval from the UTEP IRB committee. A similar packet was sent to this committee which also included the work I had done towards the project, mostly my introduction and literature review. The IRB committee approved the project, and we were off!

The first step was to put together a thesis committee that consisted of my advisor, Dr. Samuel Riccillo, and a former Communication professor of mine Dr. Eduardo Barrera. The third seat had to be from outside of the Communication department. With the advice of Dr. Riccillo I asked Dr. Tom Schmid from the UTEP English department and luckily, he was interested in my
study. Since all three professors were available and willing to sit in on my thesis committee; I scheduled a prospectus meeting where I presented the power point presentation that I had presented to my school principal, EPISD Public Relations department, and IRB committee. The meeting took place without a hitch and without any objection. I then began to plan my schedule in order to conduct the survey with every willing and qualified subject at my school campus.

First I brought it up to the colleagues with whom I worked the most closely or had previous conversations, in order to test the waters. This caused a buzz around our water coolers, since most people thought that it would be something fun to participate in, and as I presented it, full of potential to help out educators and students alike. I made one hundred copies of the consent to participate form as well as one hundred questionnaires. I attached the consent form to the survey, which required a name and signature, in order to participate in the study. The consent form ensured the participants of their anoniminity and explained that any data gathered would be used for research towards effective teaching methods. The two documents were placed into separate envelopes so that their identity was not connected to their responses, but was number coded so that their consent form could be referenced in case their willingness to participate was brought into question.

The survey packets were distributed by hand at their classrooms or offices to eighty five certified teachers of the Bassett Middle School, and were collected individually, one by one. Seventy six packets were completed and collected, due to four being incomplete, and eleven were unreturned. The results of the questionnaires were organized and analyzed through the use of Microsoft Excel. After collecting the data, I had to take a hiatus from working on the study. After a long break from this project, I was able to return, in order to complete it. I had to find a new advisor, and through the help of Dr. Stacey Sowards, I was able to bring Dr. Sarah Ryan on
board as my new thesis advisor. Dr. Tom Schmid, agreed to stay on the committee and, Dr. Richard Pineda agreed to serve on my committee as well.

When deciding on the type of research method to use for this study, many factors were considered. The sample size and target population needed for this research played a big part in the decision to use the survey method. Even though an experimental method may have allowed the experiment to manipulate more variables and allow for a greater sense of control over the situations and responses observed, and would therefore yield some significant results. The survey method allowed the study to recruit a greater number of participants and allowed them to benefit from a less intrusive and more comfortable attitude when answering these questions anonymously. The demographics of these participants consisted of middle school teachers with a minimum of a bachelor’s degree and a Texas teaching certificate. The age of the participants varied from a range of twenty five years old to sixty five years old. The teaching experience of the participants also varied from less than one year of teaching experience to upwards of thirty five years teaching experience.

The survey consists of thirteen closed-ended questions. The use of humor in the classroom is the only independent variable. There are two dependent variables aimed at measuring the self perception of effectiveness as a teacher in the classroom, and the establishment of immediacy between teachers and students. There are no mediating variables that will be considered in this study. The correlation between the independent variable and the dependent variables will be measured through the responses to the thirteen questions in the survey. A Spearman’s Rho Correlation will be the measurement use to indicate a relationship between the independent and dependant variables of this study.
Research Objectives

This study will examine the correlation between the use of humor in the classroom and the decrease of communication barriers, in order to achieve a productive level of immediacy between educators and students, which will allow for productive learning environments to exist in the classroom. In order to highlight the correlation between the use of humor and the decreased level of physical and psychological barriers (Gorham & Zakahi, 1990), which is how Immediacy can be achieved by educators, this study aims to measure the use of humor by educators, and the result of this behavior. The self perception of effectiveness by teachers will also be measured, as a relation to their reported use of humor in the classroom.

Problem Formulation

Specifically the objectives of this study are as follows:

1. Measure the reported increase in the comfort level of learning environment by the teacher, in order to obtain immediacy, between themselves and the student, through the use of humor.

2. Measure the increase in the self perception of effectiveness by a teacher, through the use of humor, which can be attributed to student performance as follows:

   * Increase in the interest level of subject material by the student.
   * Increase in the comprehension of material by the student.
   * Does the use of humor aid in student communication of taught material.

Independent Variable – Humor.

Dependant Variable 1 – Self perception of effectiveness as a teacher.

Dependant Variable 2 – Self Perception of Teacher/Student Immediacy.
As mentioned previously, Spearman’s Rho calculations were performed to test the relationships between three questions that represent the independent variable, Humor, and dependent variable 1, “overall effectiveness as a teacher”. The same three questions that measured the independent variable, Humor, were analyzed in relation to dependent variable 2, “Teacher/Student Immediacy” on question number 27, “how often you are addressed by your first name,” which is a proxy for student-teacher immediacy, based on nonverbal displays of immediacy (Gorham, 2000). Spearman’s Rho is a statistical test performed on ordinal variables. Essentially, it ascertains whether a rise in one variable correlates with a rise in another variable.

For instance, one might hypothesize that eating salty snacks (independent variable) makes one drink more fluids (dependent variable). As the amount of salty snacks consumed rises, it stands to reason that one will drink more fluids. If the relationship between these variables is close to 1, that means that they are strongly correlated. A strong Spearman’s Rho correlation does not mean that there is a one-for-one increase in both the independent and dependent variable. It cannot predict how many bags of potato chips, for example, will compel someone to drink a soda. Rather, it just tests whether the two variables are connected.

Other examples of this type of correlation can be traffic accidents and drunk driving. The difference between these two examples is that the latter can be proved through statistical data, from police reports that include medical examinations to prove that alcohol was present in the systems of the individuals involved. While the measurement for the amount of beverages consumed after salty snacks, is based on the perception of the individuals that are being asked. The measure of teacher effectiveness and the achievement of immediacy between teachers and students, is also based on the perception of the people who will participate and answer this
survey. A Spearman’s Rho calculation was performed in Microsoft Excel, on the responses that were recorded through our study. The results of 76 surveys (n=76) were analyzed.
Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

The demographics for this study consisted of forty three women and thirty three men. The average age was 39 years old, but the most common age was 33. The average amount of experience was ten years, while the mode was three years.

While the highest recorded responses for question number one, “How would you rate yourself in terms of your overall effectiveness as a teacher”, was five, with none answering lower than three, the most common response for question number one was four. The results on this question indicate that all of the participants responded by labeling themselves as, at the very least, “moderately effective”. While certain individuals viewed themselves as “extremely effective”, most participants modestly labeled themselves simply as “effective”. Specifically twelve participants labeled themselves as moderately effective (answer choice 3), eighteen as extremely effective (Answer choice 5), and forty six as effective (answer choice 4). (See table #1)

*Table #1*
The most commonly recorded response for question number twenty seven, “How often are you addressed by your first name by your students?” was answer choice number one or “Never”. Specifically, fifty five participants responded as having never had their students refer to them by their first name. One participant responded with answer choice number five or “does not apply”, while six participants responded with answer choice number four or “Very Often”. One participant responded with answer choice number three or “Often”, and thirteen participants responded with answer choice number two or “Sometimes”. If addressing someone by their first name is an example of verbal behavior that indicates immediacy (Gorham, 1988), then a significant amount of the population in this study has experienced this type of behavior from their students, “sometimes to very often”. (See table #2)

*Table #2

27.- How often are you addressed by your first name by your students?

Question number three represented the independent variable of this study, the use of humor in the classroom, by asking the participants of this study to rank “How often (on
they “use humor (i.e. jokes, witticisms, humorous facial expressions, funny stories, etc.) during each class session” from “none at all” to “twelve times or more per session”.

The most common response for this question was answer choice number two or “1-3 times” per class session, with twenty five participants. While eleven participants reported using humor “12 times or more” per class session; there were three participants that reported “never” using humor in the classroom. Twenty one participants responded as using humor “4-7 times per class session”. Sixteen participants responded as using humor “8-11 times” per class session, and twenty five participants responded as using humor “1-3 times” per session. (See Table #3)

*Table #3

3.- How often (on average) do you use humor (i.e. jokes, witticisms, humorous facial expressions, funny stories, etc.) during each class session?

Question number eight represented the independent variable of this study, the use of humor in the classroom, by asking the participants of this study to rank “How often” they “use humor in class?” From “Never” to “Does Not Apply”. The most common response for this
question was four or “Very Often”, with no one answering with a five or “Does Not Apply”. Specifically twenty nine respondents reported using humor in the class as “Very Often”. While twenty four respondents reported their use of humor in the class as simply “Often”, twenty one reported their use as “sometimes”. Only two respondents reported “Never” using humor in class. (See Table#4)

*(Table #4)*

8.- How often do you use humor in class?

Question number seventeen represented the independent variable of this study, the use of humor in the classroom, by asking the participants of this study to rank “How often” they ”use actual words and/or other elements of a humorous example (i.e. a joke, pun, comic strip, funny story, etc.) to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the
language during a typical class?", from “Never” to “7 times or more”. The most common response to this question was answer choice two, or “1-2 times”, only three participants responded with answer choices one and five, or “Never” and “Does Not Apply”. Specifically answer choice number four or “5-6 Times” was chosen by sixteen participants, while answer choice three or “3-4 Times”, was chosen by twenty five participants. Answer choice number two or “Sometimes” was the most popular choice with thirty participants, choosing this as their response. (See Table#5)

*Table #5

| 17.- How often do you use actual words and/or other elements of a humourous example (i.e. a joke, pun, comic strip, funny story, etc.) to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the language during a typical class? |
|---|---|
| 0 | 1 |
| 2 | 3 |
| 4 | 5 |
| 6 | 7 |
| 8 | 9 |
| 10 | 11 |
| 12 | 13 |
| 14 | 15 |
| 16 | 17 |
| 18 | 19 |
| 20 | 21 |
| 22 | 23 |
| 24 | 25 |
| 26 | 27 |
| 28 | 29 |
| 30 | 31 |
| 32 | 33 |
| 34 | 35 |
| 36 | 37 |
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| 50 | 51 |
| 52 | 53 |
| 54 | 55 |
| 56 | 57 |
| 58 | 59 |
| 60 | 61 |
| 62 | 63 |
| 64 | 65 |
| 66 | 67 |
| 68 | 69 |
| 70 | 71 |
| 72 | 73 |
| 74 | 75 |
| 76 | 77 |
| 78 | 79 |
| 80 | 81 |

The correlation between dependent variable number one, teacher’s self perception of effectiveness, represented by question number one, and the independent variable of this study, the use of humor in the classroom, as represented by question number three, was strong. The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between the responses for question number one and question number three was **0.997634997**, which is extremely high. A strong correlation through the
Spearman’s Rho Calculation is considered to be from 0.5 to 1, and since the correlation between the responses of these two questions was in fact 0.997634997. A great majority of this study’s participants use humor in the classroom, between once to more than twelve times, during each class session, and their self perception of effectiveness as a teacher, ranges from moderately effective to extremely effective.

Of the three respondents that reported never using humor in the classroom, all three perceived themselves as an effective teacher. Two classified themselves as “extremely effective” while one responded as being “moderately effective”. This points to the idea that self perception as an effective teacher does not require that the individual use humor in the classroom, or that the more humor a teacher uses, the higher their level of self perceived effectiveness they will have. Our Spearman’s Rho Correlation measurement, is simply pointing out that of the 76 respondents that classified themselves as being, at the very least, a slightly effective teacher; 73 of them reported using humor in the classroom. Every one of the participants, that classified themselves as an “Effective” teacher, through answer choice number four, used humor in their classroom. (see table #6)
The correlation between dependent variable number one, teacher’s self perception of effectiveness, represented by question number one; and the independent variable of this study, the use of humor in the classroom, as represented by question number eight, was also strong. The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between the answer choices of these two questions was 0.998058783. This correlation, based on the significance scale of .5-1, is again high. Most of the participants in this study have a self perception of effectiveness as a teacher, which ranges from moderately effective to extremely effective, use humor in class between a frequency of “sometimes” to “very often”. Only two participants, who had classified themselves slightly effective and extremely effective, reported never using humor in the class. The participant that
reported using no humor in each class session on question number three, and who classified themselves as being extremely effective on question number one, reported using humor in class “Sometimes”, on question number eight. (see table #7)

*Table #7

The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between dependent variable number one, teacher’s self perception of effectiveness, represented by question number one, and the independent variable of
this study, the use of humor in the classroom, as represented by question number seventeen was also strong. The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between these two questions was 0.997416268. Most of the participants in this study, have a self perception of effectiveness as a teacher which ranges from moderately effective to extremely effective among all participants; and they use humor during a typical class to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the language, from a frequency of sometimes to very often. Three participants reported that the use of humor for the purpose of illustrating grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the language, simply does not apply to their typical class (See table 8). The same three participants that had reported not using humor during each class session on question number three, reported never using humor for these purposes in their typical class either.

The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between dependent variable number two, *Immediacy between student and teacher*, represented by question number twenty seven, and the independent variable of this study, *the use of humor in the classroom*, as represented by question number three, was strong. The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between these two questions was 0.997416268. A great majority of this study’s participants, use humor in the classroom, between once to more than twelve times, during each class session. Although a large amount of the participants of this study feel that they are “never” addressed by their first name by their students; a significant amount of the participants in this study did feel that they are addressed by their first name by their students as often as “sometimes” to “very often.” while one participant felt that this question did not apply to them (see table#9).
1. - How would you rate yourself in terms of your overall effectiveness as a teacher?

17. - How often do you use actual words and/or other elements of a humorous example (i.e. a joke, pun, comic strip, funny story, etc.) to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the language during a typical class?
The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between dependent variable number two, *Immediacy between student and teacher*, represented by question number twenty seven; and the independent variable of this study, *the use of humor in the classroom*, as represented by question number eight was strong. The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between these two questions was **0.99569378**. The participants of this study use humor in class between a frequency of “sometimes” to “very often”. Although a large amount of the participants of this study feel that they are “never” addressed by their first name by their students; a significant amount of the
participants in this study did feel that they are addressed by their first name by their students as often as “sometimes” to “very often”, while one participant felt that this question did not apply to them (see table #10).

*Table #10

The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between dependent variable number two, *Immediacy between student and teacher*, represented by question number twenty seven, and the independent variable of this study, *the use of humor in the classroom*, as represented by question number seventeen was strong. The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between these two questions was 0.996418319. Most of the participants of this study they use humor during a typical class to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the language, from a
frequency of sometimes to very often. Although a large amount of the participants of this study feel that they are “never” addressed by their first name by their students; a significant amount of the participants in this study did feel that they are addressed by their first name by their students as often as “sometimes” to “very often.” While one participant felt that this question did not apply to them. (See table#11)

*Table #11

Strong correlations were found between the independent variable and each of the dependent variables of this study. Hypothesis number one stated that “*The use of humor leads to high levels of self perceived effectiveness by teachers.*” The independent variable, *use of humor in the classroom*, which was represented in questions 3, 8, and 17, were all strongly correlated with dependent variable 1, *Teacher Self Perception of effectiveness*, which was represented by
survey question number 1. Hypothesis number two stated that “The use of humor in the classroom leads to Immediacy between teachers and students.” The independent variable (questions 3, 8, and 17), was also strongly correlated dependant variable 2, Immediacy between Teacher and Student.

Hypothesis 1 suggested that a significant positive relationship would exist between the use of humor in the classroom and the self perception of effectiveness as a teacher. Results of a Spearman’s Rho Correlation supported this Hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 forwarded a significant positive relationship would exist between the use of humor in the classroom and immediacy between teachers and students. Results of a Spearman’s Rho Correlation supported this Hypothesis.

A significant amount of teachers that felt comfortable enough to use humor as a tool for communicating with their students also felt a sense of effectiveness in their classroom. These results are based on the reported self perception of the individuals that voluntarily, answered the closed-ended survey that was used to gather data for this study. Reality is a product of our own creation (Devitt, 2008); therefore, if one believes that he or she is effective at being an educator, then it is so. It is not to say that if humor is not used in the classroom, then immediacy between the student and the teacher will not be reached, and that the educator involved will not feel a sense of effectiveness as a teacher. Or that the more humor one uses in a classroom the higher the level of immediacy and sense of effectiveness as a teacher. What the results of this study are indicating is that if the teacher involved is comfortable enough to use humor as a communication tool, it will go hand in hand with their personal sense of effectiveness. Of course this brings us back to the individual definition of goals in education to fully understand what other factors lead
to the sense of effectiveness for the participants of this study, as well as other potential participants of future studies.

Consequently this study also found that teachers who use humor in the classroom as a communication tool feel that they are able to reach immediacy between themselves and their students. Since Immediacy is not a common everyday term, the survey described behavior that is congruent with common verbal behavior between individuals that have achieved immediacy “How often are you addressed by your first name by your students” (Gorham, 1988), as stated in question number 27. Unlike the first hypothesis, which was also confirmed, the data are based more on actual reports of behavior than self perception. It is still based on the recollection of events by the participating teacher, but it does not ask for an opinion; the survey asks for a report of events.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Can humor make the world of education a better place? This fundamental question has many sides to it. What are the goals of education? Are they to learn as much as possible? Does the usefulness of what is being learned play into the equation? Is the pursuit of happiness a factor that exists in the grand scheme of things? Are the goals of education the same for everyone? These are all questions that cast doubt on the significance of study results such as this one. However, the pessimistic concept of a half empty glass does not exist without the presence of the optimistic half full glass. This study found through the quantitative review of its population, that humor seems to help teachers reach their students.

One does not become a teacher in order to get rich. There is a certain satisfaction that comes when one is able to make an impact. As a teacher in an underprivileged area, many rewards have played a part in the sense of fulfillment that I have achieved through overcoming obstacles that stand in the way of my personal effectiveness as a teacher. Ultimately helping students achieve their goals in life makes the world a better place. I feel that my use of humor in the classroom has helped me get through the tough barriers that exist between someone in my position, and a student who has barricaded him or herself behind a series of barriers in order to feel safe. By breaking down barriers that kept my students from communicating with me, and from reaching their academic potential, I feel that I have reached many individuals. Humor should be considered a strong option when determining methods of attaining immediacy. Individuals who feel comfortable enough to use this method of appeal can feel as if they possess a tool to help them perform a task. It is important to establish goals in order to get on the right track; otherwise, it is possible to get stuck on a road to nowhere. School can serve as a sanctuary for children who desperately need direction in their lives. The pursuit of happiness should be the
main factor that builds the academic goals for all students. Once that idea has been established then one can move towards reaching these goals.

This study yielded significant results for every research objective. A correlation between the use of humor in the classroom and teacher student immediacy was found. There are verbal and nonverbal cues of immediacy behavior, and a student addressing a teacher by their first name is an example of a verbal one (Gorham, 1988). Typically, a student in U.S. culture does not address a teacher by his or her first name. In fact, there are barriers of communication that limit the way that a student can address a teacher. When a student does address a teacher by their first name, without insulting them by doing so, it is a sign that this barrier has been broken down.

Twenty of the participants of this study reported that they had at some point been addressed by their first name by their students. The relationship between their use of humor in the classroom and this sign of verbal immediacy behavior yielded a strong correlation. The relationship between these two variables truly raises the eyebrows for immediacy behavior research. A connection such as this, needs to be examined further.

What about the other fifty six participants of this study? They did not feel that students had ever called them by their first name. Does this mean that these individuals have not reached a level of immediacy that some of their colleagues have reportedly attained, or that factors other than humor are involved in achieving immediacy? The population of this survey were employed in a public middle school where it is common knowledge that a student addressing a teacher by their first name will be looked down upon, so it is often times avoided in order not to cause a stir. These results may have been different if the students were adults. This points towards a strong suggestion for further research, where the population for the study could consist of college
professors or professional trainers. In these settings, the use of an educator’s first name by a student may be accepted more readily.

The size of the sample being measured in this study was a limitation; and more participants would likely yield more significant results. Settings such as a university or an entire school district would yield results that could better indicate concerns and solutions of the issues at hand. In order to truly explore the presence of immediacy in the classroom other immediacy behaviors should be examined. This can include several verbal and nonverbal behaviors of immediacy; such as, the teacher addressing the student by his or her first name or the teacher smiling at the class, or several other cues (Gorham, 2000). The questionnaire may need to be directed to the students instead of the teacher, in order to get a true account of these occurrences.

A correlation was also found between the use of humor in the classroom and a self perception of effectiveness by teachers. Since humor is a sign of confidence (Graham, 2009), it only make sense that individuals would see themselves as effective if they are participating in behavior that normally points towards this feeling. If goals have been established in a classroom then upon obtaining these goals a teacher may feel that they are effective because they have attained these goals. In future research the instrument should include a question that is worded in such a way that would make the connection between the feeling of effectiveness as a teacher and the use of humor in the classroom, clearer. At the same time the questionnaire should also be directed towards students and perhaps administrators, in order to get an outside measurement of teacher effectiveness. The definition of an effective teacher should be provided in the survey, in order to avoid confusion as to what an efficient teacher is indeed considered to be.

I believe that both effectiveness of a teacher and the evidence of immediacy behavior in the classroom, is difficult if not impossible to truly describe in a closed-ended format. Future
research, that is a personal goal of mine, will be to pursue a qualitative account of instances in which teachers have used humor in the classroom. Through accounts of occurrences in actual classrooms, one can begin to get a better idea as to what teacher efficiency really means, as well as what immediacy in a classroom truly looks like. The survey can be directed towards educators and students inquiring about instances in which humor was used in a classroom. These questions will ask for open ended answers that will hopefully be rich in description, so that it can paint a picture of the learning process at work.
References


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Steele, K.E. (1998). The positive and negative effects of the use of humor in the classroom setting. *ERIC database*.


# APPENDIX A

**Pedagogical Humor Questionnaire (Teacher)**

*Circle the number that corresponds to your response for each question:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>How would you rate yourself in terms of your overall effectiveness as a teacher?</td>
<td>1 (totally ineffective) 2 (slightly ineffective) 3 (moderately effective) 4 (effective) 5 (extremely effective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>How often do you use personal examples or talk about experiences that you have had outside of class?</td>
<td>1 (Never) 2 (Sometimes) 3 (Often) 4 (Very Often) 5 (Does Not Apply)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>How often (on average) do you use humor (i.e. jokes, witticisms, humorous facial expressions, funny stories, etc.) during each class session?</td>
<td>1 (uses no humor) 2 (1-3 times) 3 (4-7 times) 4 (8-11 times) 5 (12 times or more)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>How often do you ask questions or encourage students to talk?</td>
<td>1 (Never) 2 (Sometimes) 3 (Often) 4 (Very Often) 5 (Does Not Apply)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>How much of the humor that you use is related or relevant to classroom subject matter?</td>
<td>1 (none) 2 (a little) 3 (about half) 4 (most) 5 (all)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>How often do you get into discussions based on something a student brings up even when it doesn’t seem to be part of the lecture plan?</td>
<td>1 (Never) 2 (Sometimes) 3 (Often) 4 (Very Often) 5 (Does Not Apply)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>To what degree does humor make your students feel more relaxed (i.e. less anxious) in the classroom?</td>
<td>1 (increases anxiety) 2 (no effect) 3 (slightly relaxed) 4 (noticeably relaxed) 5 (considerably relaxed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>How often do you use humor in class?</td>
<td>1 (Never) 2 (Sometimes) 3 (Often) 4 (Very Often) 5 (Does Not Apply)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. To what degree does humor in the subject matter being taught increase your students’ interest in learning that subject?
   1    2     3 4 5
   (decrease in interest) (no increase) (slight increase) (noticeable increase) (considerable increase)

10. How often do you address your students by name?
    1 2 3 4 5
    (Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

11. Do you feel that your students learn more about the culture that is relevant to the subject being taught, by being exposed to humor that is also relevant to that culture?
    1 2 3 4 5
    (not at all) (a little more) (slightly more) (noticeably more) (considerably more)

12. How often do you get into conversations with individual students before or after class?
    1 2 3 4 5
    (Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

13. Do you feel that your use of humor makes you more approachable to students in class?
    1 2 3 4 5
    (less approachable) (no effect) (slightly more) (more approachable) (considerably more)

14. How often do you refer to class as “our” class or what “we” are doing?
    1 2 3 4 5
    (Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

15. Do you feel that humor improves your students’ ability to learn the subject at hand in the classroom, by creating a more comfortable and conducive learning environment?
    1 2 3 4 5
    (hampers learning) (no effect) (slight improvement) (improvement) (considerable improvement)

16. How often do you provide feedback on individual work through comments on papers, oral discussions, etc.?
    1 2 3 4 5
    (Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

17. How often do you use actual words and/or other elements of a humorous example (i.e. a joke, pun, comic strip, funny story, etc.) to illustrate grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any other particularity of the language during a typical class?
18. How often do you ask students how they feel about an assignment, due date or discussion topic?
   1  2  3  4  5
   (Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

19. To what degree do you feel that illustrative humor (as characterized in question #17) helps your students to learn the subject they are studying?
   1  2  3  4  5
   (not at all) (very little) (somewhat) (noticeably) (considerably)

20. How often do you invite students to telephone or meet them outside of class if they have questions or want to discuss something?
   1  2  3  4  5
   (Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

21. In your opinion, what is the ideal amount of humor (i.e. number of humorous items employed) for an environment conducive to learning during a typical class period?
   1  2  3  4  5
   (none) (1-3 times) (4-7 times) (8-11 times) (12 times or more)

22. How often do you ask questions that solicit viewpoints or opinions?
   1  2  3  4  5
   (Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

23. In your opinion, how important is humor to the learning of subject material in the classroom overall?
   1  2  3  4  5
   (not at all) (minimally) (slightly) (important) (considerably important)

24. How often do you praise students’ work, action or comments?
   1  2  3  4  5
   (Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

25. How often (on average) do your students use humor to communicate what they have learned during each class?
   1  2  3  4  5
26. How often do you have discussions about things that are unrelated to class with individual students or with the class as a whole?

1  2  3  4  5
(Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

27. How often are you addressed by your first name by your students?

1  2  3  4  5
(Never) (Sometimes) (Often) (Very Often) (Does Not Apply)

Thank you for your time and insight. Your responses will help researchers better understand the nature and effects of humor in the classroom.
The Use of Humor in The Classroom

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What is Humor?

- Humor can not be easily defined and can change in meaning according to the situation.
- For operational purposes, humor will be defined as a quality that makes a situation amusing (Steele, 1998). General amusement is synonymous to a feeling that causes or can cause laughter (Steele, 1998).
Background

- Humor can be used as a means of releasing negative emotions, a means of learning or, an expression of freedom (Rieger, Ryndak, 2004).
- Humor can be viewed as positive in nature and can be quite useful when attempting to educate people (Sheldon, 1996).
- Humor has been suggested to promote better comprehension, increased retention of material, and a more comfortable learning environment (Garner, 2005).
- Humor provides students with added positive associations and can make them more likely to remember information (Hill, 1998).

Three Basic Types of Humor

- **Verbal**: Involves the use of words and it can be found in such things as puns, jokes and witticisms
- **Visual**: Involves the use of images as seen in cartoons and in the physical appearance of some comedians
- **Physical**: Relates to the use of actions, which could include wild actions such as pie fights or chase scenes

(McCauley, 1983)
Importance of the Study

- Findings in this study will highlight the effectiveness of humor in the classroom, from the teachers perspective only.
- This is therefore not the full paradigm of immediacy.
- The results of this study will be significant and useful to other educators and researchers who are interested in the results, of using this behavior, as an education tool.

Variables of the Study

- **Independent Variable - Humor**: Defined as “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating something that is comical, amusing, or absurdly incongruous” (Merriam-Webster, 2007, Merriam-Webster, 2007 online dictionary, [http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/humor](http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/humor)).
Variables of the Study

- **Dependent Variable #1** – Self perception of effectiveness as a teacher

Variables of the Study

- **Dependent Variable #2** - Teacher/Student Immediacy
Operational Definitions

- **Humor**: Defined as “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating something that is comical, amusing, or absurdly incongruous” (Merriam-Webster, 2007, Merriam-Webster, 2007 online dictionary, http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/humor).
- **Pedagogy**: Pedagogy theories attempt to utilize effective methods of teaching, in order to facilitate the learning process for teachers and students who are on both ends of the education process.
- **Immediacy**: can be defined as behavior that reflects a more positive attitude of the sender to the receiver (Andersen, 1979), which is normally achieved by achieving a decreased physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and students (Gorham & Zakahi, 1990).

Objectives of the Study

- To highlight the correlation between the use of humor in order to achieve immediacy between educators and students, that will lead to success in the classroom.
- These findings will be measured strictly from the perspective of the teacher, not from the students perspective.
Hypothesis

- **Hypothesis #1**: The use of humor leads to high levels of self-perceived effectiveness by teachers.

- **Hypothesis #2**: The use of humor in the classroom leads to perceived immediacy between teachers and students.
Method Selection

- Non-Probability Sampling Method
- Purposive Sampling Method
- Convenient, relevant, large group of participants.
- All participants possess anywhere between less than one year to upwards of thirty-five years teaching environment.
- Sample size eighty participants.
- Demographics (male/female)

Survey Method

- Participants must have some teaching experience in order to participate in this study.
- Survey includes thirteen close ended questions, that inquire about the participants teaching experience and the result of situations having to do with humor.
Sampling Plan

- The population of participants for this study will be the teachers at Bassett Middle School.
- All of these teachers have some teaching experience, in a public school setting.
- There are about 83 teachers at this school.

Instrumentation

- Twenty seven close ended questions.
- Will provide five responses, that refer to:
  - The level of frequency
  - The level of agreement or disagreement.
Pre-testing Procedures

- Rough Draft Practice – Once the project is approved by IRB, I will distribute the survey to the English department which consists of ten teachers.
- I will count these surveys with the rest of them as long as there are not any problems encountered.
- If there are some problems with this practice run, then I will correct the problems before I administer it to the rest of the faculty.
- After the pre-testing I will deliver the rest of the surveys to the remainder of the faculty, and provide an envelope with a form I.D. that will match them to the survey they filled out, in order to separate their names from the data.

Discussion

- **Hypothesis 1:**
  - *The use of humor leads to high levels of self perceived effectiveness by teachers.*

- **Independent Variable:**
  - *Use of humor in the classroom*
  - Represented by questions 3, 8, 17.

- **Dependent Variable #1:**
  - Self Perceived Effectiveness by Teacher
  - Represented by question 1.
The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between the responses for question number one and question number three was 0.997634997, which is extremely high!

The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between the answer choices for question number one and number eight was 0.998058783.
Discussion

The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between question number two and number seventeen was 0.997416268.

Hypothesis 2:
The use of humor in the classroom leads to perceived immediacy between teachers and students.

Independent Variable:
Use of Humor in The Classroom
Represented by questions 3, 8, 17.

Dependant Variable 2:
Teacher/Student Immediacy
Represented by question 27
Discussion

- The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between questions number three and twenty seven was 0.997416268.

Discussion

- The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between question eight and twenty seven was 0.99569378.
Discussion

The Spearman’s Rho Correlation between question number seventeen twenty seven and was \(0.996418319\).

Conclusion

- **Hypothesis 1:**
  Forwarded a significant positive relationship would exist between the use of humor in the classroom and the self perception of effectiveness as a teacher. Results of a Pearson’s Rho Correlation supported this Hypothesis.
Future Plans for Research

- Add a Qualitative Component:
  - Recount on the following space provided, *in your own words, with as much description as possible, a time that you used humor in the classroom; and how you feel that cultural barriers played a part in this process.*

Future Plans for Research

- Ethnographic review in order to describe cultural factors that contributed to the outcome.
Thank You for your Time!
Curriculum Vita

Francisco A. Galindo grew up in El Paso, Texas; after living the first seven years of his life in Juarez, Chihuahua. As an entering student with Spanish as a first language, learning the English language was a difficult task. Thanks to the support from various teachers and mentors, Francisco was able to master both languages. As an educator for the El Paso Independent School District since 2005, Francisco has found great satisfaction in helping students reach their academic potential by overcoming similar barriers which he had to overcome himself. He earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Psychology from the University of Texas at El Paso in 2003, and has since then continuously worked towards educational research aimed at effective communication in the classroom.