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Article

Laughing Your Way to Academic Success: Can Laughter Impact Learning and Well-Being in the Law School Classroom and Are There Cross-Cultural Differences?

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Many surveys of law students show that they are unhappy and can suffer from depression, anxiety, and even substance abuse at unusually high rates. While what transpires in their classrooms is only a small piece of the puzzle that forms a law student's psychological well-being, the issue is whether laughter in the classroom can improve both learning and well-being and, if so, whether cross-cultural differences exist that might make the use of humor with international students more challenging. After briefly examining the findings about the mental health of law students, this article reviews: (1) research on whether humor in the classroom can improve learning; (2) research on whether humor in the classroom can decrease student anxiety; (3) research on whether there are gender differences associated with the use of humor; and (4) research on whether there are cross-cultural differences in the perception and effectiveness of humor.

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DIANA J. SIMON *

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the first multi-school student survey in over twenty years was conducted to assess the mental health of law students, in addition to issues such as alcohol and drug use.¹ Based on a comprehensive report of the findings published in the *Journal of Legal Education*, the findings were troublesome: 17% of the law students who responded screened positive for depression, 23% screened positive for mild to moderate anxiety, and 14% screened positive for severe anxiety.² Of those who had actually been diagnosed with anxiety,³ nearly one-third were diagnosed during law school.⁴ And a body of literature suggests that mental health issues are more of an issue for law students than other graduate students or the general population.⁵

In addition to this broad-ranging study, individual law schools have also conducted their own surveys. For example, in 2014, the Yale Law School Mental Alliance conducted a survey about mental health challenges.⁶ Seventy percent of all law students who responded reported experiencing a

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¹ Jerome M. Organ, David B. Jaffe & Katherine M. Bender, *Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns*, 66 J. LEGAL EDUC. 116, 116 (2016).

² *Id.* at 136–37.

³ The survey asked several questions regarding each respondent’s mental health condition, including embedded screening tools related to depression and anxiety, along with questions regarding history of diagnosis of these mental health conditions. *Id.* at 136.

⁴ *Id.* at 138.

⁵ *Id.* at 118–19.

⁶ JESSIE AGATSTEIN, ZACH ARNOLD, RACHEL DEMPSEY, JOYA SONNENFELDT & JOSH WEISS, *FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS: A REPORT ON MENTAL HEALTH AT YALE LAW SCHOOL 3* (2014), https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/area/departments/studentaffairs/document/falling_through_the_cracks.pdf.

mental health concern.⁷ Subsequently, between 2017 and 2018, Harvard Law School conducted its own mental health survey and produced results that were similar to the multi-school survey conducted in 2016.⁸ Of those students who participated in the survey, 35% screened positive for mild depression, 15.6% for moderate depression, 5.8% for moderately severe depression, and 9.1% for severe anxiety.⁹

In response to these mental health issues, law schools have created special classes and garnered other resources, such as yoga, meditation, therapy dogs, and on-site counselors.¹⁰ This article explores whether bringing laughter into the classroom can also reduce anxiety and, at the same time, increase learning. The article then turns to whether teachers need to be aware of, and sensitive to, any cross-cultural differences in humor.

I. INSTRUCTIONAL HUMOR: WHAT IS IT AND ARE ALL FORMS OF HUMOR CREATED EQUAL?

Sense of humor, at its deepest level, has been defined as “nonserious social incongruity.”¹¹ While theories of humor have changed over time, this is now the dominant theory.¹² Incongruity theory states that a surprise or contradiction is essential for humor, and the incongruity exists because there is “something that violates our mental patterns and expectations.”¹³ For example, there is a joke by comedian Bob Newhart: “I don’t like country music, but I don’t mean to denigrate those who do. And for those who like country music, denigrate means to ‘put down.’”¹⁴ The statement in the first sentence is a caring statement about those who like country music, but the second sentence flips the norm on its head and says the opposite. Thus, to understand humor, students must resolve the incongruity, and, if they cannot do that, they will experience confusion instead of humor.¹⁵

Additionally, humor has been identified as an “immediacy behavior,” defined as the use of communication to enhance closeness and reduce

⁷ *Id.* at 14.

⁸ Michelle G. Kurilla, *Harvard Law School Dean Releases Student Well-Being Working Group Report*, HARV. CRIMSON (Dec. 24, 2019), <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2019/12/24/hls-mental-health-report/>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Karen Sloan, *Law Schools Tackle Mental Health*, NAT’L L.J. (May 9, 2016, 12:00 AM), <https://www.law.com/nationallawjournal/almID/1202757012950/>.

¹¹ Matthew Gervais & David Sloan Wilson, *The Evolution and Functions of Laughter and Humor: A Synthetic Approach*, 80 Q. REV. BIOLOGY 395, 399 (2005) (emphasis omitted).

¹² John Morreall, *Philosophy of Humor*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA PHIL. 1, 15 (2020).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Jokes by Bob Newhart*, DEAD-FROG, <https://www.dead-frog.com/comedians/jokes/bob-newhart> (last visited May 24, 2020).

¹⁵ Melissa B. Wanzer, Ann B. Frymier & Jeffrey Irwin, *An Explanation of the Relationship Between Instructor Humor and Student Learning: Instructional Humor Processing Theory*, 59 COMM’N EDUC. 1, 4 (2010).

physical and/or psychological distance between communicators.¹⁶ In general, when teachers engage in immediacy behaviors, reducing the distance between student and teacher, these behaviors have been tied to both teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes.¹⁷ And many studies and authors suggest that humor can be used successfully as a pedagogical tool.¹⁸

When evaluating humor and its association with positive learning outcomes, however, not all forms of humor are created equal.¹⁹ For example, “affiliative” humor, using witty remarks or jokes, is a positive humor style designed to share humor without attacking anyone.²⁰ In contrast, “aggressive” humor attacks or demeans others to elevate oneself.²¹ Thus, in general, while studies have found that using positive forms of humor, such as affiliative humor, can lead to positive results, including decreasing student anxiety, these studies have also shown that higher levels of negative humorous behaviors, such as aggressive humor, are more predictive of greater depression and lower self-esteem.²² Specifically, instructors should never tease or target students, nor should they use racist or sexist humor, forced humor, off-topic humor, or too much humor.²³ Also, instructors who

¹⁶ Brooks Aylor & Patrice Opliger, *Out-of-Class Communication and Student Perceptions of Instructor Humor Orientation and Socio-Communicative Style*, 52 *COMMUNIC. EDUC.* 122, 127 (2003); Qin Zhang, *Immediacy, Humor, Power Distance, and Classroom Communication Apprehension in Chinese College Classrooms*, 53 *COMMUNIC. Q.* 109, 112 (2005).

¹⁷ Zhang, *supra* note 16.

¹⁸ Alan K. Goodboy, Melanie Booth-Butterfield & San Bolkan & Darrin J. Griffin, *The Role of Instructor Humor and Students' Educational Orientations in Student Learning, Extra Effort, Participation, and Out-of-Class Communication*, 63 *COMMUNIC. Q.* 44, 47 (2015); Michael E. Skinner, *All Joking Aside: Five Reasons to Use Humor in the Classroom*, *EDUC. DIG.* 19, 19–20 (2010); Sarah E. Torok, Robert F. McMorris & Wen-Chi Lin, *Is Humor an Appreciated Teaching Tool? Perception of Professors' Teaching Styles and Use of Humor*, 52 *COLL. TEACHING* 14, 14 (2004).

¹⁹ John A. Banas, Norah Dunbar, Dariela Rodriguez & Shr-Jie Liu, *A Review of Humor in Educational Settings: Four Decades of Research*, 60 *COMMUNIC. EDUC.* 115, 122–25 (2011) (containing an informative table listing all types of humor, their definitions, and their level of appropriateness for use in the classroom based on the literature); Arnie Cann & Chantal Collette, *Sense of Humor, Stable Affect, and Psychological Well-Being*, 10 *EUR. J. PSYCH.* 464, 466–67 (2014); Brandon M. Savage, Heidi L. Lujan, Raghavendar R. Thipparthi & Stephen E. DiCarlo, *Humor, Laughter, Learning, and Health! A Brief Review*, *ADVANCES PHYSIOLOGY EDUC.* 341, 341 (2017).

²⁰ Cann & Collette, *supra* note 19, at 466; Rod A. Martin, Patricia Puhlik-Doris, Gwen Larsen, Jeanette Gray & Kelly Weir, *Individual Differences in the Uses of Humor and Their Relation to Psychological Well-Being: Development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire*, 37 *J. RSCH. PERSONALITY* 48, 53 (2003).

²¹ Cann & Collette, *supra* note 19, at 466.

²² Banas et al., *supra* note 19, at 130; Cann & Collette, *supra* note 19. In one study on the use of sarcasm, the results were contrary to results researchers expected. The word itself, which has a root meaning from the Greek “*sarkasmos*,” to tear flesh, is generally thought of as a negative form of humor. However, Torok and colleagues found that in open-ended student responses, one-fifth of the students specified sarcasm as an appropriate form of behavior, and, when students were asked what type of humor they would use if they were professors, students listed sarcasm as one of their top three choices. Torok et al., *supra* note 18, at 17.

²³ Banas et al., *supra* note 19, at 118; Savage et al., *supra* note 19, at 343; Torok et al., *supra* note 18, at 18.

use humor that requires students to take too much time to interpret, or is so funny that students will continue to discuss the witticisms long after the instructor has moved on, can negatively impact student learning.²⁴

Therefore, as discussed below, while there are many positive impacts of humor on both learning and decreasing student anxiety, this is only true when a professor uses positive humor, uses humor related to the course material, and uses the humor in the right dosages.²⁵

II. POSITIVE IMPACTS OF HUMOR: INFORMATION RETENTION AND LESSENING OF STUDENT ANXIETY

A. *Information Retention*

While humor does not cause learning, it creates an environment that promotes learning.²⁶ In fact, several studies have found that when professors delivered humor as an integral part of their lectures, where the humor was content-related and delivered in the right dosage, students outperformed their peers who were taught the same material without humor.²⁷ In Avner Ziv's experiment, he randomly assigned two groups of students to a statistics course: a humor group, and a no humor group.²⁸ The same professor taught both classes and delivered the same material, but in one class, the professor employed humor using a strict protocol, and, in the other class, did not employ humor at all.²⁹ The humor group outperformed the no-humor group by approximately ten percentage points on the final exam.³⁰ Ziv then was able to replicate these findings using a different subject, psychology, a

²⁴ Banas et al., *supra* note 19, at 136; Savage et al., *supra* note 19, at 344. Although an explanation of how to measure a sense of humor is beyond the scope of this article, many studies in this area of research measure humor orientation using some form of the Booth-Butterfield scale designed to measure a person's ability to produce humor. Steven Booth-Butterfield & Melanie Booth-Butterfield, *Individual Differences in the Communication of Humorous Messages*, 56 S. COMM'C'N J. 205, 212, 215 (1991). These authors found that in addition to frequently and effectively generating humorous messages, high humor orientation individuals also perceived humor to be appropriate in a greater variety of situations than low humor orientation individuals. *Id.*; see also Aylor & Oppliger, *supra* note 16, at 124 (discussing Steven Booth-Butterfield and Melanie Booth-Butterfield's "[r]esearch on humor orientation," including their finding that "HO individuals had a wide repertoire of humorous behaviors upon which to draw").

²⁵ According to research conducted by Ziv, approximately four jokes per fifty-minute class is optimal. Avner Ziv, *Teaching and Learning with Humor: Experiment and Replication*, 57 J. EXPERIMENTAL EDUC. 5, 9–10 (1988).

²⁶ Goodboy et al., *supra* note 18, at 46–47; Savage et al., *supra* note 19; Skinner, *supra* note 18, at 19–20; Torok et al., *supra* note 18, at 14–15; Melissa Bekelja Wanzer & Ann Bainbridge Frymier, *The Relationship Between Student Perceptions of Instructor Humor and Students' Reports of Learning*, 48 COMM'C'N. EDUC. 48, 48 (1999) (concluding that a teacher with a high humor orientation was associated with increased perception of learning by students).

²⁷ Skinner, *supra* note 18, at 19–20; Ziv, *supra* note 25, at 5, 12.

²⁸ Ziv, *supra* note 25, at 8–9.

²⁹ *Id.* at 9.

³⁰ *Id.* at 10.

different professor, and different students.³¹ In yet another study, content-related humor was positively associated with teacher affective learning, course affective learning, and learning indicators.³² Moreover, a professor's use of humor can increase out-of-class communication, which in turn is positively associated with academic performance and a positive affect toward learning.³³

Beyond the classroom setting, there is evidence that humor improves memory as well. As one educator-researcher aptly explained: "As brain food, humor can't be beat."³⁴ Brain scans reveal that humor "lights up" areas of the brain.³⁵ Similarly, in 2007, a Pew Research poll showed that viewers of humorous news shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* exhibited higher retention of news facts than those who received their news from newspapers.³⁶ And in a study evaluating the effect of humor on short-term memory in a small group of older adults, the result was that short-term memory could be enhanced by watching a humorous video before being administered a memory test.³⁷ Specifically, one group was asked to sit silently and not talk, read, or use their cellphones, while another group watched funny videos for the same time frame.³⁸ After twenty minutes, the participants gave saliva samples and took a short memory test.³⁹ The humor group outperformed the no humor group by more than 1.5 times when it came to memory recall, and the humor group also showed considerably

³¹ *Id.* at 10–12.

³² Melissa B. Wanzer, Ann B. Frymier & Jeffrey Irwin, *An Explanation of the Relationship Between Instructor Humor and Student Learning: Instructional Humor Processing Theory*, 59 COMM'N EDUC. 1, 1 (2010). Interestingly, in a study comparing "grade oriented" students with "learning oriented" students, the authors concluded that both types of students "participated more, worked harder, and reported increased out of class communication" with an instructor who was perceived to use humor in the classroom, although the effect was stronger for those who appreciated learning. Goodboy et al., *supra* note 18, at 54.

³³ Aylor & Oppliger, *supra* note 16, at 122–23, 131. *See also* R. L. Garner, *Humor in Pedagogy: How Ha-Ha Can Lead to Aha!*, 54 COLL. TEACHING 177, 179 (2006) (evaluating the use of humor in a statistics class, the author concluded that humor had a positive effect on content retention). Notwithstanding these studies, in a 2011 review of four decades of research on the impact of humor in educational settings, the authors explained that, while many scholars have found a relationship between humor and learning, others have found no such relationship. Banas et al., *supra* note 19, at 132–33.

³⁴ MARY KAY MORRISON, USING HUMOR TO MAXIMIZE LEARNING: THE LINKS BETWEEN POSITIVE EMOTIONS AND EDUCATION 3 (2008).

³⁵ *Id.* at 2–3.

³⁶ *Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions: What Americans Know: 1989–2007*, PEW RSCH. CTR., (Apr. 15, 2007), <http://www.people-press.org/2007/04/15/public-knowledge-of-current-affairs-little-changed-by-news-and-information-revolutions/>.

³⁷ Gurinder Singh Bains, Lee S. Berk, Everett Lohman, Noha Daher, Jerrold Petrofsky, Ernie Schwab & Pooja Deshpande, *Humor's Effect on Short-Term Memory in Healthy and Diabetic Older Adults*, 21 ALT. THERAPIES 16, 16 (2015).

³⁸ *Id.* at 21.

³⁹ *Id.* at 22.

lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, than the no humor group.⁴⁰ Thus, based on a variety of research in different settings, there is evidence that humor does positively impact learning.

B. *Student Anxiety*

In addition to learning, humor in the classroom can also help alleviate student anxiety, a welcome result for law school students, who, as discussed above, experience anxiety at high levels.⁴¹ In general, humor is linked to good moods, and it can soften the negative moods associated with life stress and daily hassles.⁴² In other words, “humor is healthy.”⁴³ Laughter has a measurable physiological effect and can help relax muscles, exercise the lungs and chest muscles, and lower pulse rate and blood pressure.⁴⁴ As such, humor in the classroom can reduce stress and anxiety.⁴⁵ Indeed, researchers have found that appropriate instructional humor is related positively to an enjoyable learning environment.⁴⁶ And students who are taught by humorous teachers have positive emotional experiences, such as pleasure and enjoyment.⁴⁷ Therefore, this research also shows that humor should help alleviate student anxiety.

III. SPECIAL ISSUE RE: INSTRUCTOR GENDER

Although there have not been many studies looking at potential gender differences that exist in the classroom in the use of humor, the few that do

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Supra* notes 2–9 and accompanying text.

⁴² Rod A. Martin & Herbert M. Lefcourt, *Sense of Humor as a Moderator of the Relation Between Stressors and Moods*, 45 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 1313, 1318–19 (1983). *But see* Rod A. Martin, *Humor, Laughter, and Physical Health: Methodological Issues and Research Findings*, 127 PSYCH. BULL. 504, 516 (2001) (reviewing all published research on the effects of humor and laughter on physical health, the author concluded that more rigorous research is needed to draw firm conclusions about the health benefits of humor and laughter).

⁴³ CHRISTOPHER PETERSON & MARTIN E. P. SELIGMAN, CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND VIRTUES: A HANDBOOK AND CLASSIFICATION 592 (2004).

⁴⁴ RONALD A. BERK, PROFESSORS ARE FROM MARS, STUDENTS ARE FROM SNICKERS: HOW TO WRITE AND DELIVER HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM AND IN PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS 7 (2003).

⁴⁵ Garner, *supra* note 33, at 177; Debra Korobkin, *Humor in the Classroom: Considerations and Strategies*, 36 COLL. TEACHING 154, 155 (1988); Savage et al., *supra* note 19.

⁴⁶ Garner, *supra* note 33, at 177, 179–80; Torok et al., *supra* note 18, at 15; *see also* Avner Ziv, *The Teacher's Sense of Humour and the Atmosphere in the Classroom*, 1 SCH. PSYCH. INT'L 21, 22 (1979) (explaining a study involving junior high students in which the author concluded that teachers with a good sense of humor can create a positive climate in the classroom).

⁴⁷ *See* Goodboy et al., *supra* note 18, at 46 (explaining that, when instructors are humorous, they “put[] students at ease”); Korobkin, *supra* note 45 (describing how “[l]earning can be more enjoyable and less stressful in a laughter-filled class”); Ziv, *supra* note 46 (explaining teachers with a good sense of humor can create a “positive climate” in the classroom).

exist suggest there are some differences.⁴⁸ These older studies found that the way male professors used humor was positively correlated toward their effectiveness, presentation, and appeal, but the use of humor by female professors was less appreciated.⁴⁹ It has also been suggested that female professors are more limited in using humor than their male counterparts.⁵⁰ However, in a recent survey conducted on the use of humor in educational settings, the conclusion was that the differences regarding humor and sex differences were small, and, thus, this seems to be an area where more research is needed.⁵¹

Outside of the educational arena, however, one recent study in the business arena suggested that gender differences exist in the use of humor at work.⁵² In this study, Jonathan Evans and colleagues developed four video recordings of a retail store manager reporting on store performance to a group of regional managers.⁵³ One female actor and one male actor played the role of the retail store manager reporting on store performance.⁵⁴ Except for the humor, the script was the same in all four videos, and the number of humorous statements was the same in the two humorous videos.⁵⁵ After participants viewed the videos, they were instructed to evaluate the humor looking at various traits, such as leadership capability, status, disruptiveness, and functionality.⁵⁶ The result showed that female humor was judged as more disruptive than male humor, and male humor was judged as more functional than female humor.⁵⁷ As far as status, in the male condition, the indirect effect of humor on performance evaluation was positive, as was the indirect effect of humor on assessment of leadership capability.⁵⁸ In the female condition, however, the indirect effects of humor on both performance evaluation and leadership capability were negative.⁵⁹ Finally, status in the humorous male was significantly higher than the non-humorous male, but status in the female was significantly lower than the non-humorous female.⁶⁰ While work humor may be functionally different from classroom

⁴⁸ Jennings Bryant, Jon S. Crane, Paul W. Comisky & Dolf Zillmann, *Relationship Between College Teachers' Use of Humor in the Classroom and Students' Evaluation of Their Teachers*, 72 J. EDUC. PSYCH. 511, 517–18 (1980) [hereinafter *Humor and Evaluation*]; Jennings Bryant, Paul W. Comisky & Dolf Zillmann, *Teachers' Humor in the College Classroom*, 28 COMMUN. EDUC. 110, 118 (1979).

⁴⁹ *Humor and Evaluation*, *supra* note 48.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 515.

⁵¹ Banas et al., *supra* note 19, at 125–26; Torok et al., *supra* note 18, at 18.

⁵² Jonathan B. Evans, Jerel E. Slaughter, Aleksander P. J. Ellis & Jessi M. Rivin, *Gender and the Evaluation of Humor at Work*, 104 J. APPLIED PSYCH. 1077, 1077, 1084 (2019).

⁵³ *Id.* at 1079.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 1080.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 1081.

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

humor, to the extent that both involve a figure of higher authority reporting on information, this suggests that more research should be done in the educational arena to see whether sexual stereotypes also exist there.

IV. CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN HUMOR: FOCUS ON CHINA

Notwithstanding the positive impacts of humor in the classroom, most of the studies above were done in United States classrooms, and these findings may not apply to Eastern cultures.⁶¹ An anecdote helps illustrate this difference: in December of 2008, a journalist from Iraq, who was at a press conference at the prime minister's palace in Baghdad, threw a shoe at President George W. Bush.⁶² Afterwards, President Bush joked: “[i]f you want the facts, it’s a size 10 shoe that he threw.”⁶³ A few weeks later, in January of 2009, a student threw a different shoe at Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who was giving a speech at the University of Cambridge.⁶⁴ The student was removed, and Premier Wen, who apparently did not see the humor in the situation, said, “[T]his despicable behavior will do nothing to hold back the friendship of the Chinese and British people.”⁶⁵ Although this is only anecdotal evidence, it does demonstrate one key point: same conduct, different reaction. As one commentator noted: “Whereas Westerners are seriously humorous, Chinese people are humorously serious.”⁶⁶

In general, while Chinese people have been endowed with a deep-seated humor,⁶⁷ they deliberately de-emphasize humor in life, preferring to express it in a subtle manner, except in art and literature, where it is given free reign.⁶⁸ Confucianism⁶⁹ specifically has devalued humor, and Chinese do

⁶¹ Banas et al., *supra* note 19, at 128–29.

⁶² *Shoes Thrown at Bush on Iraq Trip*, BBC NEWS (Dec. 15, 2008, 1:02 AM), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7782422.stm>.

⁶³ Xiaodong Yue, Feng Jiang, Su Lu & Neelam Hiranandani, *To Be or Not To Be Humorous? Cross Cultural Perspectives on Humor*, 7 FRONTIERS PSYCH. 1, 1 (2016); *Shoes Thrown at Bush on Iraq Trip*, *supra* note 62.

⁶⁴ John F. Burns, *Shoe is Thrown at Chinese Premier*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 3, 2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/03/world/asia/03shoe.html>.

⁶⁵ Yue et al., *supra* note 63; Burns, *supra* note 64.

⁶⁶ Yue et al., *supra* note 63 (citation omitted).

⁶⁷ Ofra Nevo, Baruch Nevo & Janie Leong Siew Yin, *Singaporean Humor: A Cross-Cultural, Cross-Gender Comparison*, 128 J. GEN. PSYCH. 143, 146 (2001).

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ Chinese culture is not purely dominated by Confucianism of course, and humor has been valued largely by Taoism and Buddhism. Feng Jiang, Xiao Dong Yue & Su Lu, *Different Attitudes Toward Humor Between Chinese and American Students: Evidence From the Implicit Association Test*, 109 PSYCH. REPS 99, 100 (2011). In fact, one of the most influential forms of Buddhism in China is Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism, where the attitude towards humor and laughter is typified in the figure of the Buddha by the broad grin of the jolly, fat “laughing Buddha” of curio shops around the world. Michel Clasquin, *Real Buddhas Don’t Laugh: Attitudes Towards Humour and Laughter in Ancient India and China*, 7 SOC. IDENTITIES 97, 98 (2001).

not think that humor is a desirable personality trait.⁷⁰ Under Confucian values, people should behave more formally and restrain laughter.⁷¹ Thus, whereas Americans generally consider humor as an important trait to have and one that is essential for creativity, the same is not true for Chinese society.⁷² Thus, while humor is universal, the literature points toward the existence of cultural differences or perspectives.⁷³

Three studies are of particular interest to instructors who have a combination of Eastern and Western students in their classes because they show that there might be some differences in how humor in the classroom is perceived and why the positive impacts of humor discussed above might lessen as a result.⁷⁴

In the study conducted by Qin Zhang, which targeted teacher humor orientation directly, one key finding was that there was a positive correlation between instructor humor orientation and classroom communication apprehension.⁷⁵ In this study, an investigation was conducted with 176 undergraduate students enrolled in an English Department at a large university in central China.⁷⁶ The study focused on classroom communication apprehension or the level of fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated interaction with others in a classroom.⁷⁷ Classroom communication apprehension is important because where it exists, it correlates negatively with academic achievement.⁷⁸ Chinese culture is a collectivistic culture with a large power distance between student and teacher.⁷⁹ Therefore, Chinese teachers are expected to exert authority, be

⁷⁰ Tonglin Jiang, Hao Li & Yubo Hou, *Cultural Differences in Humor Perception, Usage, and Implications*, 10 FRONTIERS PSYCH. 1, 2 (2019).

⁷¹ Jiang et al., *supra* note 69.

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ Sari Alatalo & Anne Poutiainen, *Use of Humor in Multicultural Classroom*, 5 ISRAELI J. HUMOR RSCH. 65, 69 (2016); Abdul Salam Mohamad Alnamer, Abdel Rahman Mitib Altakhaineh & Sulafah Abdul Salam Alnamer, *On the Appreciation of English Punny Jokes by Arabic-Speaking EFL Learners*, 6 ASIAN J. APPLIED LINGUISTICS 54, 58 (2019); Banas et al., *supra* note 19, at 128–29; Guo-Hai Chen & Rod A. Martin, *A Comparison of Humor Styles, Coping Humor, and Mental Health Between Chinese and Canadian University Students*, 20 HUMOR 215, 229 (2007); Jiang et al., *supra* note 70, at 2–4; Jiang et al., *supra* note 69, at 104–05; Robert F. McMorris, Roger A. Boothroyd, Debra J. Pietrangelo, *Humor in Educational Testing: A Review and Discussion*, 10 APPLIED MEASUREMENT EDUC., 269, 294 (1997); Yue et al., *supra* note 63, at 7–8; Zhang, *supra* note 16, at 110.

⁷⁴ Jiang et al., *supra* note 69, at 104; Yue et al., *supra* note 63, at 7–8; Zhang, *supra* note 16, at 118–19.

⁷⁵ Zhang, *supra* note 16, at 118.

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 115.

⁷⁷ *Id.* at 111–12. Interestingly, based on prior studies, as many as twenty percent of students in United States classrooms—where there is more of an egalitarian approach—experience some form of communication apprehension, so this phenomenon is not unique to Chinese students. *Id.* at 109.

⁷⁸ John Bourhis & Mike Allen, *Meta-analysis of the Relationship Between Communication Apprehension and Cognitive Performance*, 41 COMMUN EDUC. 68, 69 (1992).

⁷⁹ Zhang, *supra* note 16, at 114.

strict, and punish students.⁸⁰ In this study, the idea was to look at Chinese college classrooms and humor.⁸¹ One of the hypotheses was that because humor is one immediacy behavior (there are others, such as calling a student by the student's first name or walking around a classroom) designed to close the distance between student and teacher, instructor humor orientation would correlate positively with classroom communication apprehension in Chinese classrooms.⁸² This hypothesis was proved to be correct.⁸³ Perceived instructor humor orientation was correlated positively and significantly with student classroom communication apprehension.⁸⁴ Thus, while humor in a classroom full of American students can result in a more relaxed environment, reduce anxiety, and increase learning, the same cannot be said of Chinese classrooms.⁸⁵ This could be explained by the following factors: (1) humor focuses attention on the individual, which is not favored in a collectivistic culture; (2) humor could interfere with the hierarchical nature of the relationship between teacher and student in Chinese culture, creating anxiety; and (3) some immediacy behaviors are considered inappropriate in Chinese classrooms.⁸⁶ Thus, while this study did not compare American students to Chinese students, the conclusion that instructor humor orientation increased apprehension among Chinese students suggests there are cross-cultural differences in the use of humor in the classroom.

In a study comparing the attitudes of Chinese students with American undergraduates, Feng Jiang and colleagues found that Chinese students tended to associate humor with unpleasant adjectives and seriousness with pleasant adjectives, while American students did the opposite.⁸⁷ In this study, American and Chinese undergraduates were examined to evaluate their explicit and implicit attitudes toward humor.⁸⁸ The researchers hypothesized that Chinese undergraduates studying in China would explicitly appreciate humor as much as their American counterparts studying in Hong Kong but would implicitly tend to be more negative about humor.⁸⁹ Their hypothesis was borne out: compared with the Chinese group, the American group had a generally more positive implicit attitude toward

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 111.

⁸¹ *Id.* at 111–12.

⁸² *Id.* at 112, 114.

⁸³ *Id.* at 118.

⁸⁴ *Id.*

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ Jiang et al., *supra* note 69, at 103.

⁸⁸ *Id.* at 100–01. Note that this study, unlike the one Zhang conducted, was not tied to teaching, *per se*.

⁸⁹ *Id.* at 101.

humor.⁹⁰ Interestingly, both Chinese and American students believed that Americans were more humorous than Chinese.⁹¹

In the most recent of the three studies, a comparison of Hong Kong⁹² college students and Canadian college students showed that Canadian participants evaluated humor as significantly more important than the Chinese participants.⁹³ Another important finding was that, while Canadian students nominated relatives and friends when asked to identify the people they found most humorous, Chinese participants nominated mostly professional comedians and rarely nominated relatives and friends.⁹⁴ Thus, these findings also show that Chinese and Westerners view humor differently, consistent with the idea that Chinese hold negative implicit attitudes toward humor.⁹⁵

In addition to the studies above, to appreciate humor, the listener needs to understand the humor and the non-verbal cues associated with humor.⁹⁶ For example, while studies show that one very effective humor tool is for instructors to make fun of themselves,⁹⁷ in Asian cultures, where close attention is paid to preserving the dignity of all people, or saving face, this type of humor may fall flat.⁹⁸ Further, while some humor often requires the listener to resolve the incongruity (as in the Bob Newhart joke, quoted above, making fun of people who like country music⁹⁹), if the listener is not aware of cultural stereotypes (that people who like country music are not

⁹⁰ *Id.* at 104.

⁹¹ *Id.*

⁹² The researchers noted that one limitation of the study was the participation of only Hong Kong Chinese where students are highly westernized, as opposed to Mainland Chinese. The researchers hypothesized that Mainland Chinese would show even greater differences with Westerners. Yue et al., *supra* note 63, at 8.

⁹³ *Id.* at 7–8.

⁹⁴ *Id.* at 6–7.

⁹⁵ *Id.* at 7–8; Jiang et al., *supra* note 69, at 104.

⁹⁶ ADEMOLA O. ATANDA, *HUMOUR IN CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION 2* (2015). For example, even the act of smiling is related to cultural norms and values. In Western cultures, the mouth is crucial in identifying and interpreting facial expressions, but in Eastern cultures, when reading facial expressions, the focus is more on the eyes than the mouth for the purpose of identifying the difference between real and fake smiles. Xiaoqin Mai, Yue Ge, Lin Tao, Honghong Tang, Chao Liu & Yue-Jia Luo, *Eyes are Windows to the Chinese Soul: Evidence from the Detection of Real and Fake Smiles*, 6 PLOS ONE 1, 5 (2011).

⁹⁷ Savage et al., *supra* note 19, at 344.

⁹⁸ Marcia Carteret, *Non-Verbal Behavior in Cross-Cultural Interactions*, DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE (Nov. 3, 2010), <https://www.dimensionsofculture.com/2010/11/non-verbal-behavior-in-cross-cultural-interactions/>; see also Jiang et al., *supra* note 70, at 2–3 (describing how “[r]esearch has found a West-East cultural difference in humor usage,” where “Americans used significantly more self-defeating” humor and Chinese used “humor to conceal one’s problems” as a self-enhancing strategy, which “may attributed to the fact that saving face is one of the most important attributes for the Chinese personality”) (citations omitted).

⁹⁹ To be clear, the author of this article does not believe that people who like country music are unintelligent, and, in fact, she likes country music.

smart), this type of joke is also going to fall flat.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, assuming that one cardinal rule associated with the use of humor in the classroom is to use it only where it is understandable by all, this joke might not qualify.¹⁰¹ There is no “universal joke,” and the humor of a particular culture may seem pointless or puzzling to people in other cultures who lack knowledge or information regarding cultural nuances.¹⁰² Thus, instead of promoting learning, an inability to resolve the incongruity can result in distraction and confusion.¹⁰³

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, given that law students suffer from depression and anxiety at higher levels than their peers who are not in law school, the research seems to suggest that use of humor—the right kind in the right dosage—can help alleviate that anxiety and, in the process, promote learning. Instructors should be mindful, however, when a classroom consists of students who come from different cultures, who may have different perceptions of humor. In these situations, the students’ understanding will depend upon their exposure to Western culture and the exact type of humor used in the classroom.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Alnamer et al., *supra* note 73, at 63. In this study, the researchers looked at the understanding of puns by Arabic-speaking EFL learners and concluded that these learners had little understanding of English puns; one reason they suggested for this is the ignorance of western culture. *Id.* at 61–62. See also Goodboy et al., *supra* note 18, at 45 (“if the incongruity is not resolved, students will be distracted or confused by the message”).

¹⁰¹ Torok et al., *supra* note 18, at 19.

¹⁰² Alatalo & Poutiainen, *supra* note 73, at 70–71; Nevo et al., *supra* note 67, at 144.

¹⁰³ Melissa B. Wanzer, Ann B. Frymier & Jeffrey Irwin, *An Explanation of the Relationship Between Instructor Humor and Student Learning: Instructional Humor Processing Theory*, 59 COMMUN EDUC. 1, 4 (2010).