

**USING HUMOROUS VIDEO CLIPS TO ENHANCE
STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING, ENGAGEMENT AND
CRITICAL THINKING**
Mordechai Gordon

This essay examines the results of my attempt to use humorous video clips in a 'Philosophy of Humor and Laughter' course taught in the Fall of 2010 and 2011. The regular display of these clips was designed to enhance my students' understanding of the central concepts of the course, participation in class discussions and to encourage them to think more critically and creatively. The results of a survey I administered at the end of the semester suggest that there is a positive correlation between the use of the humorous clips and my students' understanding of the content, engagement in the lessons and ability to think critically. Both the quantitative and qualitative results of the survey as well as other methods of data collection indicate that watching and analyzing the humorous clips provided the students with a very valuable perspective that illuminated the ideas that we read. The results of this study also suggest that a course on the philosophy of humor and laughter can be very effective in getting students to think philosophically and appreciate the value of philosophy for their lives.

Think Autumn 2014 • 85

1. Introduction

Research on humor and learning suggests that humor and laughter can not only coexist with serious learning and rigorous investigation, but can actually enhance them. Studies that have examined the connection between humor and learning have shown that humor and laughter can

reduce anxiety, create a positive learning environment, and increase student motivation and enjoyment of the topic. For instance, R. L. Garner (2006, 179) found that 'the use of appropriate humor can facilitate a more relaxed atmosphere and provide a cognitive break that allows the student to assimilate the information.' The literature on humor also indicates that teachers who are comfortable with laughter and humor have a greater chance of helping their students to think in more critical and creative ways (see Ziv, 1983 & 1988). According to Alleen Nilsen (1988, 931), 'Humor at its best is excellent for challenging the status quo, and we need to make sure that we're not getting in its way.' Cris Mayo (2008, 249) echoes this sentiment, noting that 'humor is an invitation to think differently, from another perspective, while at the same time inhabiting one's own perspective; in other words, humor encourages one to learn.'

In his book, *On Humor*, Michael Mulkay (1988) insightfully elucidates the power of humor to cultivate thinking. Mulkay explains that 'unlike serious discourse, humor actively creates and fosters ambiguity, and uses it to generate incongruity and interpretative contrast' (28). Whereas in serious discourse ambiguity is often regarded as a problem that should be avoided or reduced, in humor ambiguity is an essential part of the discourse. The benefit of the ambiguity created by humor is that it can get us to think about issues from multiple perspectives and question things that we normally take for granted. Moreover, for Mulkay, the existence of humor 'serves as a constant sign of the failures, inadequacies and limitations of our serious world and of the pattern of language-use by means of which we produce the world' (222). This means that humor can function as a liberating force, one which can free us from conventional ways of speaking, acting and being in the world that no longer make sense.

This essay examines the results of my attempt to use humorous video clips in a 'Philosophy of Humor and Laughter' course taught in the Fall of 2010 and 2011. The regular display of these clips was designed to enhance

my students' understanding of the central concepts of the course, participation in class discussions and to encourage them to think more critically and creatively. The question that guides the present study is: to what extent does the viewing and analyzing of humorous video clips correlate with my students' comprehension, engagement and thinking? In what follows, I describe the course in which I used humorous video clips, the students who participated in this course, the particular clips that were used as well as my methods of data collection. Then I analyze the results of the survey which was designed to assess the impact of the video clips on my students' understanding of the material, engagement and thinking skills. I conclude this paper by briefly discussing some conclusions and implications for professors and teachers who may wish to use humorous film in their courses

2. A Philosophy of Humor and Laughter Course

In the Fall of 2010, I introduced a new elective course to our university curriculum entitled 'The Philosophy of Humor and Laughter' (PL 300). The main goals of this course were to explore the nature and value of humor in our daily lives and examine humor critically as a virtue that can help us take ourselves less seriously and live more fully. In this course, we analyzed the major accounts of humor such as the superiority, incongruity, and relief theories while highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each theory. Adopting a critical philosophical lens, we also explored some important connections between humor and culture, aesthetics, ethics, and education. The main readings for this course included two books by John Morreall *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987) and *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (2009) as well as selections from Simon Critchley's work *On Humor* (2002) and Thomas Nagel's (1971) essay 'The Absurd'.

There were a total of fourteen students enrolled in my Philosophy of Humor and Laughter course in 2010 and fifteen in the Fall of 2011; the students were quite diverse in their interests as well as in their undergraduate level and majors. Several students had previously taken a basic course in philosophy but none had ever been exposed to a class that attempted to analyze humor and laughter philosophically. Thus, one of the notions that I tried to get across in our first meeting of the semester is that humor and laughter are topics that are worthy of serious consideration and philosophical analysis. This message was important to convey to the students from the very outset in order to get them to think deeper about humor, and also to dispel the assumption on the part of some that this was going to be a class in which we sit together in a circle once a week and tell jokes for two and a half hours.

In order to get the students interested in the lessons as well as to encourage them to think critically about the theories of humor we were reading, I opened virtually every meeting with a couple of short comedic clips that were in some way related to the ideas we were discussing that week. The clips that I used in this course ranged from 2 to 10 minutes in length; many of the clips were my own but others were ones that students in the class had recommended that we view. They included stand-up routines and segments from shows of a diverse group of comedians from George Carlin and Richard Pryor to Jerry Seinfeld, Jon Stewart, Kathy Griffin and Sarah Silverman among others. After showing each clip I usually asked students a number of questions like: what made the clip funny in your opinion? Who is the comedian trying to poke fun at? What type of humor did the comedian use in this clip? And can you relate the humor in this skit to any of the theories that we read for today? A discussion always followed in which the class analyzed the clips we just watched in relation to the texts that were assigned. In these discussions, students had an opportunity to voice their opinions about the comedic acts and their relation to the different theories as

well as to raise more general questions and comments about philosophy and human existence.

For the midterm, I asked the students to select a short comedic clip (2–5 minutes) from any video or television program they liked and explain why they chose this particular clip. More importantly, I asked them to provide a detailed account of what made this clip funny in their opinion while drawing on and analyzing one or more of the humor theories that were covered thus far. The majority of the students displayed a solid understanding of the texts we had studied and were able to use one or more of the theories we learned as a lens through which they evaluated the clip that they chose (86% of the students received a B or better on this test). The final project in this course asked students to research in depth a topic related to humor that they were interested in. For this project, students could choose for example to: analyze one of the numerous types of humor including – wit, irony, satire, the absurd, or self-depreciating humor; focus in depth on a particular theory of humor and some of the possible critiques of this theory; compare and contrast two different theories of humor and take a position on the relative strengths and weaknesses of each; or explore the connection between humor and another topic such as ethics, education, or racism. Again, I was pleasantly surprised that about 76% of the students earned a B or higher on their research paper. Taken together, the comedic clips I used at the beginning of each lesson, the midterm and the final research paper provided the students with substantial experience in analyzing comedic and philosophical texts.

At the end of the semester, I asked the students to complete an anonymous survey that was aimed at ascertaining the impact of watching and analyzing the video clips on their understanding of the content, willingness to participate in class discussions as well as on their ability to think more critically and creatively. The survey included six questions and was designed to provide me with both quantitative and qualitative data. The numerical scale ranged from 1 (**strongly disagree**)

to 5 (**strongly agree**). After each question, the students were prompted to provide a detailed explanation (qualitative) of their rating on the quantitative scale. Below are the questions, I used in the survey:

- 1) I enjoyed the video clips that were shown in this course.
- 2) Analyzing the video clips helped me better understand the theories.
- 3) Watching the video clips helped me feel more relaxed in this class.
- 4) The video clips increased my interest in participating in class discussions.
- 5) Watching and analyzing the video clips enhanced my critical thinking skills.
- 6) Watching and analyzing the video clips helped me think more creatively.

3. Data and Analysis

After two years of teaching the Philosophy of Humor and Laughter course and administering the same survey each year, I felt like I had enough data to assess the impact of using the humorous clips on my students' understanding, engagement and thinking skills. In analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative data, I chose to focus primarily on the responses to questions 2, 4, 5 & 6. The reason is that these four questions pertained most directly to the impact of watching and analyzing the humorous clips on learning, participation and thinking. In what follows, I examine my students' responses to each of these questions individually and then provide a more general analysis of the results as a whole.

Approximately eighty-two percent (82%) of the respondents reported that *analyzing the video clips helped them better understand the theories that we studied* (22 out of 27 subjects either agreed or strongly agreed with this

statement). In response to this statement, one student wrote that 'generally, I better understand material when I am given the opportunity to practice applying it, so the clips were definitely helpful'. A number of people wrote in response to the same statement that the video clips added a different dimension that enhanced their understanding of the theories. For instance, one student noted that 'I learn from visual examples and oftentimes simply talking about a theory did not make sense to me. But after viewing the clips, the theories became more understandable.' Another student wrote: 'I'm an audio/visual learner. It sunk in [when we watched the clips] and discussing all of our answers as a class really helped to solidify the specific theory we were analyzing.' These comments clearly suggest that the video clips helped many students visualize and make connections to the theories learned. My own reflections as well as the results of the midterm and final mentioned above confirm the finding that watching and analyzing the video clips enriched students' understanding of the humor theories covered and the content of the course in general.

Similar to the results for question #2, about eighty-one percent (81%) of the students noted in their survey that *the video clips increased their interest in participating in class discussions*. One student, who agreed with this statement, noted that 'I feel that it acted as another talking point I could raise in discussion.' Another student who gave a positive rating explained that 'there was no right or wrong. We all got to speak our mind and analyze.' Other students talked about how the video clips made the class more interesting and amusing, inspired them to want to share their opinions and helped feed the discussion. These results confirm my belief that watching and analyzing the video clips helped at least some students who were confused or intimidated by the theories we read to become more vocal in our class discussions. As one student wrote, the clips 'gave us something to talk about that we could all relate to and share our own examples. Students were allowed to suggest clips, which was great because we got to see what other people thought was funny.'

Seventy-four percent (74%) of the participants in the survey either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that *watching and analyzing the video clips enhanced their critical thinking skills*. In response to this statement, one student noted on the survey that 'many video clips that we saw in class had already been seen by many students, so it was interesting how the theories we were learning about forced us to view the clips in different, more analytical ways.' A number of students commented on how the humorous clips forced them to think differently and more deeply about the readings. Summarizing this sentiment, one student wrote that 'it made me think a lot more and have to relate what I read to what I was watching with no real help.' Although this student may have been frustrated that I never told the class in advance how the clips were related to the readings, he or she clearly recognized that the clips and the discussions that followed helped the students think deeper and more critically.

The last statement in the survey, which asked them to rate and comment on the extent to which *watching and analyzing the video clips helped them think more creatively* generated the least amount of positive results. Only fifty nine percent (59%) of the participants responded positively to this statement (4 out of 12 the first year I taught the course and 12 out of 15 the second year gave this statement a 5 or 4 rating). One of the students who reacted positively to this statement wrote that 'because of the array of clips and different theories, sometimes you would have to think outside the box to see where the theory was in the clip.' Another student wrote in the survey that 'whenever you have to make connections between scholarly work and everyday situations, it requests a certain amount of creativity, and definitely allowed me to visualize the humorous clips with a greater sense of understanding, which ultimately leads to improved creativity.' Both the quantitative and qualitative results for this question lead me to conclude that watching and analyzing the video clips helped *some* but certainly not all of the students think more creatively.

Taken as a whole, the results of this survey suggest that there is a positive correlation between the use of the humorous clips and my students' understanding of the content, engagement in the lessons and ability to think critically. Both the quantitative and qualitative results of the survey as well as my own reflections on this course indicate that watching and analyzing the humorous clips provided the students with a very valuable perspective that illuminated the ideas that we read. That is, the humorous clips added a visual and auditory dimension to this course that enhanced their ability to make sense of the theories we discussed. My findings also suggest that this added dimension encouraged many students to participate more in the class discussions and helped them to think deeper and more critically about the texts we read. Simply put, watching and analyzing the humorous clips helped many students make connections to the content of the lessons and their own lives that would not have been possible without this aspect of the course. It is significant to remember that the literature on how people learn from Dewey to modern Constructivism teaches us that such connections are what help students understand the material and think more critically.

To be sure, the relation described here between the use of the humorous clips and my students' understanding of the content, engagement in the lessons and ability to think critically should not be conflated with a direct causal connection. What is at stake here is merely a correlation rather than a relation based on linear causality. I do not believe that watching and analyzing humorous clips is a necessary condition for the positive learning outcomes outlined above. Still, I think that my two year experience teaching this course demonstrates that using comedic clips can help *facilitate* student understanding, speaking and thinking skills. The results of the survey my students completed, my own reflections on this course as well as the literature review all suggest that watching and analyzing humorous clips related to the course content can lead students to

reach insights that they would not have attained without this activity.

With respect to the last learning outcome – the extent to which watching and analyzing the video clips helped students think more creatively – the results were mixed and inconclusive. One possible explanation for the difference between how the students responded to this question in comparison to the other three is that creative thinking (especially the first year I taught this class) is not something that we defined or spent much time talking about in this course. Hence, many students may not have been as familiar with it as they were with critical thinking or with other learning proficiencies. Since I did not spend much time developing this theme in the course, it stands to reason that the students would not place much value on it in the survey. Another possible explanation for this finding is that creativity may be something that can be more easily recognized in others versus oneself. There is no doubt in my mind that these two hypotheses are very tentative and inconclusive. Much more research needs to be done on the relation between watching and analyzing humorous video clips and students' ability to think more creatively before any definite conclusions can be reached.

4. Conclusions and Implications

Although the present study was very limited in its scope and scale, there are still some general conclusions and implications that can be outlined here. First, my study suggests that the use of humorous video clips can enhance students' understanding of the content of the course. In my case, the analysis of the humorous clips provided students with a deeper and more nuanced appreciation of humor and laughter. This conclusion is evidenced both by the findings of the survey and by comparing students' initial definitions of humor to their later conceptions as shown on the midterm and final. Based on all this evidence, there is

little doubt in my mind that my students' knowledge of the content was significantly enhanced by interacting with the humorous clips.

Second, the survey results suggest that the use of humorous video clips can enable many students who may be initially intimidated by philosophy to think more philosophically. Several students commented in the surveys on how the clips helped them think more critically, consider alternative perspectives and think outside the box. Including an audio-visual dimension in a philosophy course seems to make it easier for undergraduate students who have only very limited experience with philosophy to think more analytically. Since the current generation of students tends to be attracted to and comfortable with audio and visual stimuli, it stands to reason that using the humorous clips can prompt them to think more critically. Simply put, such stimuli play to students' strengths and can therefore make it easier for them to share their opinions and engage more critically with complex philosophical theories.

Third, I suspect that the use of the humorous clips to elucidate various philosophical theories of humor and other abstract concepts can help many students develop an appreciation for philosophy in general and its relevance for their lives. For instance, when we discussed the *superiority theory of humor* at the beginning of the semester I showed the class Jerry Seinfeld's famous clip in which he pokes fun at people who seem possessed by their Blackberries or iPhones. Many of my students were very amused by this clip and heartily laughed out loud. After watching this film, I asked the class what made it funny in their opinion. Some students talked about how Seinfeld's derogatory portrayal of people's infatuation with their Blackberries and iPhones was amusing and made him seem 'superior' to those people. Others mentioned that it was his story-telling and comedic skills that made this skit so hilarious. Toward the end of our discussion, one student captured the essence of this clip when he said 'what made this clip so funny is that when Seinfeld is laughing at his wife's obsession with the

Blackberry, he is really laughing at us!’ Evidently, this student was able to enjoy the humor in the Seinfeld clip on a personal level and perhaps even begin to question his own habits and values. The point is that the discussions that followed the viewing of humorous clips, in which students shared with their peers their own interpretations of the text, created an opportunity for new insights to emerge, ones that may not have been anticipated in advance. In short, such sharing and analysis can often lead students to think more critically and investigate their own lives in a deeper manner.

Finally, it is likely that a course on the philosophy of humor and laughter can help attract more students to this major and to the type of thoughtful analysis that it provides. Since humor and laughter are topics that virtually every student can relate to and generally enjoys, addressing this topic philosophically can provide an impetus for many students who otherwise would not consider taking philosophy courses to do so. It can introduce undergraduate students to the process of philosophical investigation in an amusing and non-threatening manner.

Mordechai Gordon is Professor of Education, School of Education, Quinnipiac University. Mordechai.gordon@quinnipiac.edu

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