 S P E E C H I N C

Humor as part of classroom culture. And how does it translate online?

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Often, the classroom culture is what makes kids want to go to school, and enjoy being there. Key words associated with a strong classroom culture include: safe, pleasant, interesting, social, and community. Fostering a classroom culture that embodies these elements can be challenging in a virtual format. Humor plays a key role in creating a strong, positive learning environment. Nuanced communication skills, such as humor, are easily lost in socially distant learning spaces.

One of the most common forms of humor naturally occurring in an in-person educational environment is the spontaneous, harmless violation of expectations. That is, something is funny if it contradicts one’s sense of how things are supposed to be. The shared experience of this surprising (and benign) contradiction creates community and increases morale. (recall the power of “private jokes”) Shared humor increases feelings of social support, and is relationship building.

Humor can also enhance the actual learning process. Shared laughter is a powerful way to reinforce learning, by making the process effective and exciting. Humor makes tasks less laborious and threatening. Humor can both capture and maintain students’ attention. For example, in an initial assessment I may include some humor with the immediate purpose of establishing rapport, capturing attention, putting parents/child at ease. And more often than not, months or even years later, upon graduation that child will remind me of the humor we shared in that office first visit.

Lastly, and perhaps most important at this time, shared humor dampens conflict and enhances feelings of safety. Humor can be an effective coping mechanism to lessen or buffer psychological distress. In email communications with my staff during shelter-in-place, I always included a quick, funny visual pertaining to our high stress situation, since humor is an indicator of relaxed, safe times. Surely this is something we want to generalize to on-line learning.

Elements that make humor effective include pacing, timing, economy of expression, vivid language, and the ability to read and respond to the energy of the group. Without the richness of verbal and non verbal communication of in-person situations, the opportunities for shared humor decreases, and the margin for miscommunication and misunderstanding increases virtually.

For example, consider the role that timing plays with humor. Digital platforms can make it difficult to know when to talk, why there may be a pause, and can be generally disruptive to the natural back and forth between students and teachers. Periods of silence create a natural conversational rhythm in real life discussions. However, when on a video call those pauses become unnatural and stressful.

With regard to being able to read and respond to the energy of the group, virtual platforms make this increasingly challenging as well. It can be tricky to read key elements of discourse and humor such as body language, eye contact and facial expressions given a digital platform. By maintaining constant visual gaze at the screen, rather than shifting our gaze back and forth between people and actions as would be typical in person, we focus on too few visual cues instead of the full range of body language that we would normally be gathering. Genuine eye contact is not possible through video, given the position of the camera. By staring at the webcam (necessary to demonstrate artificial eye contact on video), teachers and students both may miss other important visual cues. Gestures can be difficult to use or read. For example, large hand gestures often go out of the screen, or moving your hand toward the screen can make it look giant.

Since the spontaneous opportunities for humor, amusement and delight will likely be diminished with distance learning, parents and teachers can rely on more intentional and deliberate opportunities. For example, we can ask students to build humor into occasional writing assignments. We can add a humorous item to a test, or assignment. Humorous quotes or cartoons can be circulated, and maybe Fridays are “Joke day”? Language based humor, based more heavily on multiple meanings, allusion, puns and plays on words can help to mitigate the loss of spontaneous, situational humor of the in-person classroom.

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