

Appropriate and relevant humour in the university classroom: insights from teachers and students

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Abstract

When used for the purpose of teaching and learning, humour must be relevant and appropriate to the context. However, what constitutes appropriate and relevant humour is unclear. Past studies have focussed mostly on classifying appropriate and relevant types of humour. Additionally, students' and teachers' perceptions of what these constitutes are likely to differ, meaning that the effectiveness of the humour used by teachers may vary depending on the context. With this in mind, it is important to consider teachers' and students' perceptions of the appropriateness and relevance of humour. For this paper, five award-winning teachers and 10 students were interviewed regarding their perceptions and experiences of the use of humour in university teaching. Four themes were identified that relate to teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the appropriateness of humour: Appropriate humour is relevant humour; Appropriate humour happens at a suitable time and in a suitable manner; Appropriate humour enhances teachers' credibility; and Inappropriate humour is disrespectful humour. Three themes were identified related to the relevance of humour: Relevant humour is related to the learning content; Relevant humour is related to daily experiences in life; and Irrelevant humour is humour that students do not understand. On the basis of this study, this paper offers pedagogical suggestions for teachers who wish to use humour effectively by taking into consideration what humour is considered appropriate/inappropriate and relevant/irrelevant.

Keywords: appropriate humour, relevant humour, humour, teaching and learning, higher education.

1. Introduction

The Instructional Humour Processing Theory (IHPT), proposed by Wanzer, Frymier, and Irwin (2010) highlights two aspects that are pertinent for teaching and learning: the appropriateness and the relevance of humour (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011). Despite the importance of the appropriateness and relevance of humour in educational contexts, very little has been dedicated to understanding what counts as appropriate and relevant humour for the purpose of teaching and learning. To address this concern, I explored university teachers' and students'

perceptions of what constitutes appropriate (or inappropriate) and relevant (or irrelevant) humour for teachers to use in the classroom.

1.1. Humour and context

Humour is generally defined as things that people use to make others laugh (e.g., jokes, cartoons, word play, or funny stories) and/or a person's character or ability to do this (Ruch, 1998). However, humour functions differently in different contexts. For example, stand-up comedy involves a comedian performing on stage with the goal of making the audience laugh – the ability to achieve this goal is also the key indicator of a good or bad comedian (Keisalo, 2018). Keisalo notes that comedians normally elicit laughter through communicating their personal points of view or relaying stories about life, culture or politics that they find funny or ironic.

Politicians sometimes also use humour in their public speeches. However, eliciting laughter is not the primary goal of politicians' public speeches. Politicians may use humour to make their speeches memorable, build a rapport with the audience, show friendliness, and/or reduce negative reactions when critiquing their opponents (Meyer, 2000). In other words, politicians may use humour in their public speeches to be persuasive.

In the context of teaching and learning, humour is used to *assist* or *facilitate* learning in the classroom (Chabeli, 2008; Garner, 2006). Humour assists or facilitates teachers in gaining and retaining students' attention and helps students enhance their learning (Benjelloun, 2009; Garner, 2006; Tait, Lampert, Bahr, & Bennett, 2015; Ziyaeemehr, Kumar, & Abdullah, 2011). Humour also helps to maintain a teacher's good reputation (Lee, 2006), build and maintain good relationships between teachers and students, provide an enjoyable social context (Nesi, 2012), and foster students to build positive attitudes and emotions towards learning a subject (Garner, 2006). Because of these benefits, teachers are encouraged to use humour for pedagogical purposes. Contrary to a stand-up comedian, a politician's use of humour in public speeches, teachers' uses of humour serve more than just the goal of eliciting laughter – they serve as an instructional tool for teaching and learning purposes. Because humour functions differently in different contexts, its appropriateness and relevance vary according to the context too.

1.2. Appropriateness and relevance of humour in teaching and learning

There are two pertinent principles in IHPT: the relevance and the appropriateness of humour (Banas et al., 2011). Humour is considered relevant when it is usefully applicable to the learning content (Wanzer et al., 2010). For it to be instructional, the humour used has to be linked to the topic, concept, theories, or subject (the learning content). Relevance is crucial to the proper use of humour, and recent research—such as Bieg and Dresel's (2018) and Sidelinger's (2014) studies—have demonstrated that students prefer teachers to use humour that is relevant to the learning content. Regarding the second principle, the appropriateness of humour, Banas et al. (2011) argue that humour must be 'appropriate' or contribute positively to the environment of the classroom. If humour is perceived negatively, then it may not perform an instructional function and may be harmful for students' emotions and wellbeing in the classroom (Chabeli, 2008).

The appropriateness and relevance of humour play an important role in educational contexts because the effects of humour on teaching and learning are not always positive. Humour can be viewed as having 'double-edged effects': some might perceive humour as funny and some might find it offensive (Meyer, 2000). The danger of inappropriate humour is

that its use will negatively affect the process of teaching and learning in the classroom. For example, in Chabeli's (2008) study on humour as a pedagogical tool to promote learning, students indicated that inappropriate humour could disrupt their learning in two ways: by affecting their feelings and self-esteem and by reducing their concentration on the learning content. When the teacher uses humour that is disparaging or humiliating to students, it can hurt students' feelings and damage their self-esteem. The students also noted that teachers' overuse of humour may cause students to lose concentration and impact on the teacher's credibility with students. When teachers overuse humour, it may be perceived as irrelevant or as reducing the time available for teaching and learning (Benjelloun, 2009; Huss, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand what kinds of humour are considered appropriate (or inappropriate) and relevant (or irrelevant) in the classroom context.

In previous studies, the appropriateness and relevance of humour has been understood through the classification of humour into types. For example, in order to understand what humour is considered relevant, past studies categorise humour into types, such as 'related to learning content' and 'unrelated to learning content' (for example, Bieg & Dresel, 2018, Wanzer et al., 2010). Bieg and Dresel, however, also state that although some types of humour used by teachers are not related to the learning content, these types may still be considered instructional and useful if they contribute to students' motivation to learn in the classroom and with the teacher.

To aid in an understanding of the appropriateness of humour, most research has focussed on the specific forms humour takes. For example, Torok, McMorris, and Lin (2004) classify different kinds of humour as appropriate or inappropriate. Appropriate humour includes jokes, funny stories, funny comments, puns, cartoons, and riddles. Inappropriate humour includes sarcasm and sexual, ethnic, and aggressive or hostile humour. However, it should be noted that students from Torok et al.'s (2004) study felt that sarcasm was appropriate for use in classrooms. A study by Wanzer et al. (2006) provides detailed explanations regarding the appropriateness of types of humour. One example from Wanzer et al. illustrates self-deprecating humour. Self-deprecating humour is the act of making fun of oneself (Berk, 2003). Wanzer et al. state that self-deprecating humour is appropriate when the teacher makes fun of their mistakes or tells personal embarrassing stories. Self-deprecating humour can also be considered inappropriate, however, if the teacher criticises or belittles themselves in humorous ways. Students in Torok et al.'s and Wanzer et al.'s studies were not, however, asked to elaborate on their perceptions of appropriateness – that is, on why they felt certain types of humour were appropriate and others were not. Therefore, it is difficult to be sure of the reasons why the appropriateness of humour varies, and why forms of humour can sometimes be considered both appropriate and inappropriate (overlap) depending on the study/context.

Frymier, Wanzer, and Wajtaszczyk (2008) argue that the overlap between appropriate and inappropriate humour is due to teacher's and students' humour orientation (HO). Humour orientation refers to a person's level of humour appreciation. Frymier et al. argue that a teacher with high HO is best paired with students who also have high HO. When this happens, the teacher can use inappropriate humour and the students are not offended by it. However, in reality, a teacher will always have a mix of high and low HO students in their classroom. This seems to be a challenge for many teachers who wish to use humour effectively in their teaching, because it creates uncertainty regarding the types of humour that are suitable for use.

Overall, the studies presented so far highlight that it is crucial for teachers to understand the appropriateness and relevance of the humour they wish to use in the classroom. Past studies also focus on types of humour to determine their appropriateness and relevance. Furthermore, many studies suggest that the attributes of the types of humour are subjective – a particular type of humour can overlap between appropriate or inappropriate. This seems to show that

what we know about the appropriateness and relevance of humour is largely based upon the studies on types of humour. However, in reality, many teachers use humour instinctively. Lovorn and Holaway (2015) noted that many researchers find analysing and determining the scope of humour (including the types) challenging. This may suggest that it is even more challenging for teachers to ascertain the types of humour that they should use and the appropriateness and relevance of the available types of humour. Therefore, in this paper, I report on a study that investigated teachers' and students' perceptions of the appropriateness and relevance of humour in the classroom. Specifically, the aim of my study was to understand teachers' and students' perceptions of what constitutes appropriate (or inappropriate) and relevant (or irrelevant) humour and the similarities and differences in perceptions between teachers and students.

2. Methodology

As a starting point, I drew on two principles of IHPT: the appropriateness and relevance of humour in teaching and learning (Banas et al., 2011; Wanzer et al., 2010) to understand what constitutes appropriate (or inappropriate) and relevant (or irrelevant) humour for teachers. Although past studies have attempted to understand the appropriateness and relevance of humour from students' perspectives (for example, Sidelinger, 2014; Wanzer et al., 2006), this study attempted to understand both teachers' and students' perspectives on humour. Moreover, research conducted on these principles (appropriateness and relevance) has been focussed, in the past, on collecting data through surveys and questionnaires (for example, Wanzer et al., 2006). In this study, I attempted to gain deeper insights and understanding by conducting interviews with teachers and students regarding their perspectives.

2.1. Participants

Five teachers, each of whom received University Teaching Awards and their undergraduate students from a university in New Zealand participated in this study. The teachers were from five different academic disciplines (anatomy, biochemistry, chemistry, law, and psychology). I selected award-winning teachers because in their nominations for the awards, many students noted teaching characteristics that they admired about these teachers, including the teachers' good sense of humour. For students' participation, I approached students who were learning with one of the award-winning teachers at the time of the study in 2017. Approximately two students for each teacher agreed to participate in this study.

2.2. Data collection

I conducted one-on-one interviews with all teachers and students who participated in this study. Interview sessions with participants involved face-to-face discussions between the interviewer (me) and the teacher or student interviewee and focussed on the interviewee's interpretations of a specific situation from their own point of view (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). The aim of the interview sessions was to gain an understanding of teachers' and students' perceptions of humour, specifically the appropriateness and relevance of humour. Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval was obtained from the university's Human Ethics Committee, and all participants provided informed consent. The interviews with the teachers were conducted in the teacher's office and the interviews with the students were conducted in a private, comfortable room in the researcher's department.

With the teachers' and students' permission, I captured the interview discussion using a digital voice recorder. The audiotaped data were later transcribed for data analysis. I sent the audiotaped files to an external and confidential transcriber recommended by my department for verbatim transcriptions. I then checked all the completed transcriptions against the audio recordings to make sure that they were accurate.

2.3 Data analysis

I used thematic analysis as an analytical lens to explore teachers' and students' perceptions of humour. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Braun and Clarke stated that thematic analysis is suitable for studies that aim to explore people's perceptions and experiences relating to a phenomenon or context. As I aimed to understand the participants' perceptions of humour, I categorised the teachers' and students' descriptions and interpretations of humour into themes. I also aimed to investigate the similarities and differences in teachers' and students' perceptions of the appropriateness and relevance of humour. I describe the steps in detail:

I analysed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis, following the process as outlined by King and Horrocks (2010). This involves three stages, the first step was to read through the transcripts, highlight key words (codes) used by all participants (such as 'appropriate', 'inappropriate', 'relevant', and 'irrelevant') and attach brief notes for all codes I found. I defined all descriptive codes, repeated this process for each transcript, and refined the descriptive codes as I progressed.

Second, I clustered the relevant codes found in the transcripts according to the descriptive codes or themes. At the same time, I interpreted the meaning of the clusters and focussed on how these could help me achieve my aim for this study – an understanding of teachers' and students' perceptions of what constitutes appropriate (or inappropriate) and relevant (or irrelevant) humour.

Finally, I finalised the key themes from the data set as a whole and interpreted the themes from the theoretical stance of the study. I continued to refine the themes, conducted quality checks at all stages in the data analysis process and discussed my interpretations with other lecturers in my department.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Students' and teachers' perceptions of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate humour in the classroom

In this section, I discuss the varying perceptions of students and teachers regarding the appropriateness and relevance of humour in the classroom. I begin by discussing the varying perceptions students and teachers have of the first principle of IHPT, which is the appropriateness of humour in the classroom. Then I discuss the students' and teachers' perceptions of the second principle, the relevance of humour. Specifically, I focus on the similarities and differences between students' and teachers' perceptions of what is appropriate (or inappropriate) and relevant (or irrelevant) humour.

The students and the teachers interviewed expressed a range of views in relation to what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate humour. The names of participants are pseudonyms. According to Wanzer et al. (2010), appropriate humour creates a positive effect, whereas inappropriate humour creates a negative effect. I consider my findings regarding appropriate

and inappropriate humour in relation to the following four sub-themes: a) appropriate humour is relevant humour, b) appropriate humour happens at a suitable time and in a suitable manner, c) appropriate humour enhances teachers' credibility, and d) inappropriate humour is disrespectful humour.

3.1.1. Appropriate humour is relevant humour

Students' perceptions

I started by asking the students about their perceptions of the appropriateness of humour. When students were asked "Does the humour that your teacher uses tend to be appropriate?", the most common response was "yes". The students' responses also revealed what they understood to be appropriate humour. The explanations given by the students included:

Yes, it is pretty appropriate to the context. (Carol)

It is to do with the content. (Tina)

These comments revealed the students' view of appropriate humour as humour that is relevant to the learning content – the humour used is related to the concept, topic, theory, subject or information that students are learning during the lecture. This aligned with Bieg and Dresel's (2018) and Sidelinger's (2014) studies on students' perceptions of appropriate humour. Both studies also found that students perceived humour to be appropriate if it was relevant to the learning content. This is important as humour in this context is used to facilitate students' learning in the classroom. Therefore, it is appropriate to use humour that is relevant to the learning content.

Teachers' perceptions

In line with students' perceptions of appropriate humour, Karyn considered appropriate humour to be relevant humour. She stated, "I think it is an important way to make yourself relatable, but I think humour has to be natural. You should not force that in your lectures, because it seems fake and it seems inappropriate". Clearly, this teacher and the students in this study had the same understanding of appropriate humour – humour was considered appropriate because it was relevant to the teaching and learning context.

3.1.2. Appropriate humour happens at a suitable time and in a suitable manner

Students' perceptions

Some of the students interviewed in this study perceived humour as appropriate when it occurred at suitable times and in a suitable manner during lectures. For example, Rose commented:

Leo completely embodies it [humour]. I think it was funny at appropriate times because if he comes in, guns blazing, with all of this laughter, then I do not want to learn. I just want to laugh around, but I feel like he made in a sense that it was in pit stop ... We can have a little bit of a giggle and we could get straight back into learning and so I feel like that is good.

Ari had a similar perception regarding his teacher, Blake:

The way that Blake works is that he will be giving information and it would not be joke after joke after joke. It would not be like that. Obviously, he is teaching and going at really good pace but I think what he does is, when he notices that people are drawing back, he will have it spread out in a way that it is actually going to jolt people again.

Based on the explanations above, it is clear that the number of humorous instances used by the teachers influenced the students' perceptions of humour as appropriate. This finding is consistent with Benjelloun's (2009) findings that students were not interested in extreme types of humour, such as teachers acting like clowns or stand-up comedians. Moreover, Huss (2008) states that if the instances of humour exceed the learning content, students perceive the teacher as not serious about teaching. Evidently, the students interviewed for my study did not favour extreme uses of humour by teachers, and the teachers themselves did not overuse humour.

Teachers' perceptions

The teachers interviewed for this study also perceived that timing was an important factor in determining the appropriateness of humour. For example, Karyn explained:

I think if you are really funny in your lectures all the time and it is just a one-hour comedy show kind of, then you are not really doing your job as a professional instructor. So, I do think it is a balance. If you like to be funny sometimes, then integrate it sometimes into the lecture. But do not force it and do not do it all the time throughout the lecture. So, it is a fine balance.

Karyn's comments illustrate the view that 'clown-like' or 'stand-up comedy' styles of humour are inappropriate in the classroom. This is important because the use of too many humorous instances could lead to ineffective learning processes (Benjelloun, 2009). Humour may not serve an instructional function if the teacher and students spend most of their time laughing, leaving little time for teaching and learning. Ziv (1988) suggests that the optimum use of humour by teachers is three or four humorous instances during a lecture, to avoid a perception of clown-like behaviour or stand-up comedy.

3.1.3. Appropriate humour enhances teachers' credibility

Students' perceptions

Studies have reported that humour has an influence on how students and teachers perceive a teacher's credibility. A teacher's appropriate use of humour enhances students' perceptions of the teacher's credibility (Banas et al., 2011; Sidelinger, 2014). The inappropriate use of humour, by contrast, can diminish the teacher's credibility (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). Some students interviewed for my study considered humour to be indicative of, or to lead students to appreciate the teacher's positive teaching characteristics. One of these positive characteristics was enthusiasm. Kim explained that her teacher's use of humour made the teacher appear enthusiastic:

Because a humorous teacher is not just humorous. The way she talks and the way she presents the lecture slides, it is so much more enthusiastic. Whereas someone who is not humorous, they are quite dry and just talk about the slides in monotone and obviously, that is very stereotypical but that is what you associate with it. If someone is telling jokes, it is not like they are just talking about it in a monotone.

They are enthusiastic because they want to make people laugh. They do not want to just say a joke and then no one laugh. So they have to put effort into it.

Kim's perception was that, by using appropriate humour, her teacher (Karyn) appeared more enthusiastic in her teaching. Kember and McNaught (2007) stated that enthusiasm is one of the characteristics that teachers need to convey in order to motivate students to learn in the classroom. To the students interviewed for my study, the use of appropriate humour indicated not only that their teachers were enthusiastic but also that they were making an effort to teach. Therefore, students perceived the use of appropriate humour by Karyn and other teachers as enhancing their credibility as teachers and making them appear more enthusiastic when teaching.

In addition, the teachers' use of appropriate humour made them appear more energetic and passionate while teaching. As Ari commented, "If they show passion and they really show they have a passion with the students, I think that humour definitely gives an added edge. It definitely works for me when that happens". Lara also described how these characteristics (energy and passion) were displayed by her teacher, Carlos, through the use of appropriate humour:

I think that he is a really high-energy teacher. I think when he uses jokes and things, it is not just the humour. I mean if he was really low energy and just stood there but cracked a few jokes, it would not really be as interesting or be the same as what he is doing now. It is just the high energy goes with the humour which makes us engaged to listen to what he wants to say.

As described by Lara, Carlos's use of appropriate humour made him seem energetic while teaching. As inducing laughter is an important function of humour, teachers' use of humour requires effort and positive energy to ensure this response. Moreover, Lara indicated that Carlos's positive energy while teaching motivated her to listen to him in the classroom and, ultimately, shaped her positive perception of Carlos.

Teachers' perceptions

Similar to the students, the teachers interviewed in my study associated appropriate humour with enthusiasm, which was also recognised as enhancing the teachers' credibility. The students' belief that humour demonstrated enthusiasm aligned with the way in which the teachers described their use of humour. For example, Leo draws a connection between appropriate humour and enthusiasm in teaching:

So, I learnt very early on that if you are enthusiastic about what you teach, and then you can be like me, I am manic [humorous] for the most part about what I teach. I just take it up to that next level, my enthusiasm for my subject. I make it the most exciting thing that I can possibly ever imagine and I try to explain that to them [students] while I am doing that and I will use any tricks that will keep them focussed on what I am trying to say.

Another teacher, Patrick, shared the same perception of humour, associating it with enthusiasm in his teaching. He explained,

I think enthusiasm is the most important thing to get across to the students because I think if I am not telling them how interesting the thing I am teaching them is, then

they are not going to engage with it. So I think the humour comes out because of that. I am really enthusiastic about this and so let's have a fun conversation.

Both of these teachers recognised that it is important to appear enthusiastic in teaching. Leo and Patrick used humour with a particular intention – to make the learning content interesting for students. Blake expressed similar ideas and described his perception of the use of humour:

I like the idea that if I am seen to be not this person that is stuffy and boring and only comes in and speaks to them and tells them facts for 50 minutes and then walks out of the room again, I think it is quite nice for them to know that I have a sense of humour and that I am a normal person and that I can have a joke and a bit of a laugh at the same time.

Thus, the teachers perceived humour as a tool that allows them to demonstrate some of the characteristics of a good teacher. Evidently, based on both the students' and teachers' reflections, the teachers' use of appropriate humour allowed them to demonstrate enthusiasm and enhanced the students' positive perceptions of the teachers' credibility.

3.1.4. Inappropriate humour is disrespectful humour

Students' perceptions

The students acknowledged some inappropriate types of humour by drawing contrasts between inappropriate humour use and the humour used by their award-winning teachers. The types of inappropriate humour that students highlighted aligned with past studies of humour. For instance, the students made the following comments regarding their teachers' use of humour:

It is not offensive. (Kate)

It is not being rude to anyone or completely outrageous or just kind of silly jokes. (Anjali)

Kate and Anjali used the words 'offensive', 'rude', 'outrageous', and 'silly jokes' to specify types of humour that they perceived as inappropriate. In doing so, the comments above echoed earlier literature on the types of humour that are considered inappropriate (for example, Frymier et al., 2008; Torok et al., 2004; Wanzer et al., 2006). While the students interviewed for this study did not describe any of the teachers' humour as disrespectful, they nevertheless differentiated between appropriate and inappropriate uses of humour in the classroom when explaining the humour that their teachers used appropriately.

Teachers' perceptions

The teachers had slightly different perceptions of what types of humour were likely to be disrespectful. Leo gave a straightforward answer regarding his views on what types of humour would be disrespectful and therefore inappropriate:

I do not swear. I think that is inappropriate but there are still things I cannot say, that is the real problem with humour though. I have to be very careful, I cannot be sexist, I cannot be racist, I have to be careful that I do not offend, I cannot be offensive.

Leo listed some specific types of humour that he deemed to be inappropriate. His list aligned with the findings of Wanzer et al. (2006) regarding students' perceptions of inappropriate

humour. Wanzer et al. indicate that students found sexual jokes or comments, vulgar verbal and nonverbal expressions such as swearing, and disparaging humour focussed on students' race and beliefs, to be inappropriate. This suggests that Leo was aware of the types of humour that are generally agreed to be inappropriate within classroom contexts.

However, Patrick highlighted the fact that different people take offence to different things, so that what one person considers to be inappropriate humour may be appropriate to another. In contrast to Leo's experience, Patrick described how he had learnt to understand inappropriate humour through his teaching experience:

The first-year class of 250 people, I get complaints all the time. About 10% of the students complain. Often they are couched in terms of 'Patrick said inappropriate things'. They said, 'He should not have been joking in a lecture about human disease'. I used to be really upset by those comments. That used to really bug me until my colleagues said to me, 'There are 250 people in the class, of course you are going to upset some of them'. It is all about fundamental concept in biology. But if students say, 'Patrick made a load of jokes and I was not happy about the subject material' then people in the department will sit up and take notice.

Based on Patrick's description, it could be argued that he used inappropriate humour, which offended some students. The remarks he reported from his students (not those interviewed for this study) included 'Patrick said inappropriate things' and 'Patrick should not be joking about human disease'. However, Patrick's colleagues highlighted how inappropriate and appropriate humour are shifting notions. Wanzer et al. (2006) found that morbid humour – when the "teacher attempts involved discussions about death or another related morbid topic" (p. 189) – is considered inappropriate. Perhaps, some first-year students felt that it was inappropriate for Patrick to be humorous about a morbid or serious topic such as human disease.

However, as Patrick explained, only a few students perceived some of his humour as inappropriate. The majority of his students seemed to perceive his humour as appropriate. The different responses could result from students' humour orientations, which refers to the students' level of appreciation of humour, or their sense of humour (Frymier et al., 2008). Frymier et al. (2008) assert that students with a high humour orientation (HO) tend to perceive some types of humour as appropriate that other students find inappropriate. Perhaps the students who complained about Patrick's use of humour were students with a low HO, and this shaped Patrick's perception of inappropriate humour. Thus, it is important for teachers to make sure their use of humour is appropriate to both high and low HO students in the classroom.

In the next section, I discuss the students' and teachers' perceptions of the relevance of humour.

3.2. Students' and teachers' perceptions of what constitutes relevant and irrelevant humour in the classroom

In this section, I focus on the second IHPT principle: the relevance of humour. According to Banas et al. (2011), relevant humour is humour that does not divert students' attention away from the learning content. Both the students and teachers interviewed for this study spoke about their perceptions regarding the relevance of humour. There were some similarities and differences between the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the relevance of humour. I discuss relevance in relation to the following three subthemes: a) relevant humour is related to the learning content, b) relevant humour is related to daily experiences, and c) irrelevant humour is humour that students do not understand.

3.2.1. Relevant humour is humour related to the learning content

Students' perceptions

Five students in my study expressed their views on the relevance of humour, reflecting on their experiences learning from the teachers in this study. Some of the examples given by the students include:

I think it was relatable humour because all of it was in a chemistry context anyway or you could not really be offended by it. (Rose)

His [Leo's] sentences are somehow funny while still fitting in perfectly with what he is trying to talk about. (Jerry)

Related. Everything is related. He [Carlos] is not just going to crack a joke because it is a joke and it is funny. (Lara)

The students described their teachers' use of humour as relevant when the humour related to the learning content. Rose and Lara specifically used the word 'related' and Jerry used the term 'fitting in' to indicate that they saw a connection between the humour their teachers used and the content of the lecture. This finding regarding the students' perceptions aligned with IHPT, which suggests that instructional humour is humour which is related to learning content.

Teachers' perceptions

The teachers in this study perceived relevant humour slightly differently to the students' perceptions. One example where the teachers' views aligned with those of the students' was given by Carlos:

Absolutely! I think if students are laughing, they are learning. If students are laughing, it means they are listening to what is being said. It means students are getting the joke. If students are getting the joke, they understand why it is funny and if students understand why it is funny, then they probably understand the point that I am making. If students do not get the joke, then probably either I have told a bad joke or students are not getting the underlying points and they want to know the underlying points. Students want to know why it is funny so they want to learn about the material that is underlying it that caused the joke.

Carlos's perception here was similar to the students' perceptions; he suggested that instructional humour is often humour that is related to the learning content when teaching. However, Carlos also suggested that appropriate humour is not always related to the learning content. For example, Carlos went on to say,

Sometimes the joke might not be related to the point I am making but it will capture their attention, and I have got their attention for the maybe half a minute. If I have got it for 30 seconds, then I can make my serious point within that 30 seconds.

It is clear from Carlos's statement that he preferred to use humour that was related to the learning content. But, he also admitted that he used humour that was not related to learning content for the purpose of capturing students' attention. Patrick also acknowledged this, noting how he used humour to 'break up' the lecture, and not just to illustrate or relate content:

I know that sometimes I wander off on a tangent and told some jokes or talked in a funny way about things, which are less relevant. If I am going to use humour, I would like it to be mainly focussed on the learning content but occasionally, particularly when I have got a very technical lecture, then kind of halfway through, I think I can end up telling a story about something else.

Carlos and Patrick agreed that, ideally, the use of humour should be related to the learning content. However, they noted that humour that was not related to the learning content could also be relevant if it served other teaching and learning functions. Clearly, the teachers in my study perceived relevant humour as humour that supports students' learning, for instance, by refocusing students' attention on the learning content. But they believed it was not always necessary for humour to be directly related to the learning content.

3.2.2. Relevant humour is humour related to daily life experiences

Students' perceptions

Six students noted that they perceived their teachers' use of humour as relevant because it was related to their daily life experiences. Kim described her perceptions in this regard:

I think humour which is relatable to a large audience is important because if you are just talking about really scientific jokes or speaking in really scientific terms that no one understands, then even though it is humorous, no one is going to get it. So, I think it is really important for teachers to be humorous and make a lecture fun because then people remember it and they enjoy going to the class but it definitely is a certain element of it has to be understandable and has to be relatable to the audience.

For Kim, using humour that relates to the learning content but not to daily life experiences is insufficient. When teachers based humour on both life experience and learning content, the students interviewed in my study perceived the teachers' use of humour as more instructional, because they could apply the humorous information not only to the learning content but also to real life situations. However, this aspect of humour – humour that relates to daily life experiences – is not included in existing literature that explores IHPT principles regarding the relevance of humour (for example, Banas et al., 2011; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015; Wanzer et al., 2010).

Teachers' perceptions

In line with the students' perceptions of relevant humour, Kim's teacher, Karyn, considered relevant humour to be humour that, ideally, is related to both the learning content and to students' daily life experiences. Karyn explained:

In higher education, it is very material driven and there is so much material to be learnt and if you just have to memorise it, sheer rote memorisation, it is boring and you have to learn how to apply that material. So humour and humorous stories are some ways to kind of teach what you are learning is actually relevant to your life and let's talk about that.

Clearly, Karyn's description indicates that she perceived relevant humorous anecdotes as both helpful in teaching the learning content and applicable to the students' daily life experiences.

This finding also supports the teachers' perceptions in the previous section – *appropriate humour is humour related to the learning content* – which noted that humour can be relevant even if it is not directly related to learning content. Instead, such humour may relate to the teachers' and/or the students' daily life experiences as well as serve other pedagogical purposes.

3.2.3. *Irrelevant humour is humour that students do not understand*

Students' perceptions

As mentioned earlier, the students interviewed in this study could not recall experiencing inappropriate humour in their lectures. However, they did mention occasions when their teachers used humour that they did not understand. Such humour could be considered irrelevant, because it causes students to feel confused or disconnected from, rather than engaged with, the learning content (Lee, 2006). Wanzer et al. (2010) referred to teachers' use of humour that did not get the desired response from students (laughter) as failed attempts at humour.

Ari, Jerry, Rose, and Paige experienced some situations in which they could not understand the humour used by their teachers. For instance, Rose stated,

He [Leo] made a joke and I think he expected people to laugh but no one did because they did not get it and so then he made a joke about the fact that none of us got it because we were undergrads, we did not understand half the intelligent stuff he was saying.

Another example given by Paige was that “sometimes he [Carlos] makes jokes that he will laugh at but no one else laughs at. I think that is just because he says them too quickly”. From the examples given by Rose and Paige, it seemed that they were describing irrelevant humour or teachers' failed attempts at humour. Both students noted that, while the teachers had intended to use humour, the students did not understand or perceive the attempt as humorous, and, therefore, laughter was not evoked. The danger with irrelevant humour, especially if it happens often, is that it may make students feel disconnected from the learning content or teacher, and they may feel that the teacher is inconsiderate for not making it easy for students to understand (Wang, 2014).

Although this aspect of the relevance of humour was significant from the students' perspectives, none of the teachers in this study reflected on any humour that was 'lost' on their students. This may be because the teachers were unaware that their failed attempts at humour were perceived as irrelevant or that they had made the students feel a sense of disconnection.

Overall, the perceptions between teachers and students are similar, though there are some slight differences between teachers and students in the sub themes: *inappropriate humour is disrespectful humour*, *relevant humour is related to the learning content*, and *irrelevant humour is humour that students do not understand*. The differences were due to how their own experiences shaped their perceptions of humour.

4. Summary and implications for teachers

In the previous section, four sub-themes regarding what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate humour and three sub-themes regarding what constitutes relevant and irrelevant humour were described. With regard to the appropriateness of humour, in the sub-theme

Appropriate humour is relevant humour, both teachers and students perceived humour that is appropriate for use in the classroom to be humour that is relevant to the learning content. This is important because many teachers use humour instinctively. Teachers need to make sure that the humour they use is relevant to what students are learning in the classroom.

The sub-theme *Appropriate humour happens at a suitable time and in a suitable manner* focussed on distinguishing the types of humour used in the classroom context and other contexts. Humour used in the classroom should not be an extreme style of humour, such as that used in clown-like humour or a stand-up comedy. Teachers need to be mindful to ensure that humour used helps to facilitate or assist students' learning (cognitively and emotionally). Therefore, I suggest that humorous instances should not be overused and/or allowed to negatively affect the teaching and learning session.

The sub-theme *Appropriate humour enhances teachers' credibility* showed that it is important for teachers to use appropriate humour, as the use of humour reflects on teachers' credibility in the eyes of their students. If a teacher uses appropriate humour while teaching, students will perceive the teacher positively. In this study, both teachers and students perceived that by using appropriate humour, teachers were not only able to enhance their credibility, but were also able to portray other characteristics such as enthusiasm and passion.

The sub-theme *Inappropriate humour is disrespectful humour* not only focussed on the types of inappropriate humour, such as sexist, offensive, or racist humour, but also on understanding that different students have different levels of HO. I suggest teachers be aware that they will have a mixture of high and low HO students in a classroom and be mindful to always use humour that is suitable for both high and low HO students.

Regarding the relevance of humour, in the sub-theme *Relevant humour is related to the learning content*, students indicated that relevant humour was humour that relates to the learning content. Although the teachers agreed with this, they also admitted that at times, they used humour that was not related to the learning content. Occasionally, they used humour that served other pedagogical purposes, such as obtaining or refocusing students' attention, or introducing short breaks into the lecture. This may suggest that teachers can use humour that is not related to the learning content; however, humour should still serve other functions related to teaching and learning.

In the sub-theme *Relevant humour is related to daily experiences in life*, both teachers and students suggested that relevant humour is not only humour related to the learning content but also humour that relates to daily experiences in life. This type of relevance is important because it aids students in understanding the meaning behind humorous instances and allows them to relate content to their own personal experiences.

The final sub-theme, *Irrelevant humour is humour that students do not understand*, highlights the importance of teachers' awareness of their own failed attempts at humour. The teachers in this study did not mention anything about their uses of humour to which students did not respond (e.g., with laughter), but the students remembered and were able to express their feelings about failed attempts at humour. The students noted that they felt disconnected and confused when they did not understand attempts at humour. I recommend that teachers explain the connection, intent, and meaning behind their failed attempts of humour, so that students will not feel confused, but will be able follow the stream of information delivered by the teacher.

5. Suggestions for further research

The findings of this study show that we can explore understandings of the appropriateness and relevance of humour without focussing specifically on types of humour. In doing this, we can also explore the experiences encountered by teachers and students and understand how experience helps them to shape their perceptions of humour. This study on the appropriateness and relevance of humour should be repeated in different universities and include participants from different cultures and backgrounds. Lee (2006) suggests that cultural differences may contribute to different understandings and perceptions of what constitutes appropriate and relevant humour.

Using data from interview sessions and thematic analysis as an analytical lens adds new dimensions to previous research on how to explore and investigate the appropriateness and relevance of humour. By using this approach in this study, teachers and students were able to articulate their perceptions using their own words and were not restricted only to types of humour pre-listed by researchers. Further research could adopt this method of collecting and analysing data to build greater understanding of perceptions regarding the appropriateness and relevance of humour.

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