Episode 21: Creating Pockets of Joy, Humor, and Positivity in Your Face-to-Face and Online Class

SPEAKERS
Tierney King, Kris Roush, Michael Cundall

Tierney King 00:01
This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Humor in the classroom, it's definitely not as easy as we think. For instance, I could make a joke right now that I think is hilarious, but I will never actually know if it was that funny because I'm coming to you from a podcast. I can't hear your response. And this is just one of the barriers that instructors face when implementing humor into an online class. But it doesn't mean that you shouldn't try because humor really has some great effects in student learning. Today, we're going to dive into different tactics you can use to integrate humor into your course, how you can leverage both humor and positivity to achieve this, and then we'll end with how you can be successful at this even in an online environment. To start us off, Michael Cundall addresses the importance of humor in the classroom, in his program, Using Humor to Engage Students in the Classroom.

Michael Cundall 01:11
One of the things as a person who researched humor, I just thought it was odd that none of the leadership groups in the programs that we talked to were talking about how important humor is. And a cursory glance of the research that's out there, interdisciplinary as it is, and I do like interdisciplinary research, is we know that humor improves memory, it improves our comprehension. It is known to be helpful and help in allowing us to tolerate stress or pain better. That is, if we are presented with pain, we will report to others if there's humor around that time that we felt the pain that it actually felt less bad. We also know that it strengthens social bonds among people. And this is the one that really has me interested and what I've really been focusing on, is the way that humor improves engagement. One of one of the most important things that you'll need to understand, or I think that people need to understand when they're trying to increase levels of humor, whether it be in their working environment, or in their classrooms, or even in their family life, is that you have to set up the situation. One of the reasons that comedy clubs work so well is because when you go to a comedy club, you know what to expect, you know what's going to happen, you are there to find things funny. But when we come to work, or when we're in the classroom, this is serious business, and we have deliverables to make and we have teaching goals and learning objectives and all these things to do. And this is very important stuff because you know, my accrediting body is SACs for the Southern Association of Colleges. And you know, SACs is almost a four letter word for us because we have to do so much to do it. So for

some reason, most people aren't terribly interested in you know, having fun in the classroom, because they're so worried about getting the jobs done getting the deliverables delivered.

Tierney King 02:54
One of the ways to integrate humor into the classroom in a more natural way, so that you don't have to add an additional stress or worry to teaching is through non-goal directed behaviors, where what happens happens.

Michael Cundall 03:07
Just allow things to happen, okay? If everything is going for an exam, or a quiz, or some sort of thing that you're making, people are going to kind of lock in and focus. And one of the things that we need for humans to do is a freeing of our focus. There are simple ways through behavior that you can indicate that you're going for humor, or that you're trying to be funny, prosody changes in your voice, "Hey, look what I'm doing here, right?" Where you exaggerate body gestures, where you exaggerate your tone, and the changes in your tone. These are ways to indicate that you're trying to be funny, this is what's called metalinguistic or paralinguistic cues. These are cues not necessarily in the language, but in the way the language is expressed or presented, so as to indicate to the listener that it's not doing exactly what the word says. You can also give wry looks, and sometimes you can, when you know a joke has not gone over well, or some bit of humor you try, you can say, "Folks, that was a joke, right." Sometimes you have to actually give permission. And I would oftentimes say lean into that to say, "Folks, we can actually have jokes in here." If I said, "Okay, two professors walk into a bar..." We know if we are people who have any experience with jokes, that this is a joke setup. So you can take advantage of communication styles, communication formats that are known to be of a humorous nature. And that sets the conditions for you, right?

Tierney King 04:30
So we're talking about humor cues, and how we can kind of integrate that humor into the classroom without straining your teaching. And now we're going to pair that comedic nature with positivity, and how having an optimistic attitude can do wonders for both your students and yourself as an educator. With this next speaker, Kris Roush explains how positive psychology can help set the tone in your class in her program, How Do Master Teachers Create a Positive Classroom?

Kris Roush 04:58
Let's take a look at optimism. We all know that having an optimistic attitude is sometimes what we need to make it through the hard times, to persevere. When we feel like just giving up. How many successful graduates look back on their college experience, and are thankful for the college professor who believed in them? Let's do that for our students. You could reframe that long climb up from zero points to 300 points by saying on the first day of the semester, you have 300 points today. Now all you need to do is just keep them. Share some examples of former students with challenging situations who sought extra help, and ended up being successful in the class. Suggest that students not think how am I ever going to memorize 250 terms. Instead, invite them to think about how great it will feel at the end when they can say, I know 250 parts of the human body. Ask a former successful student to come to a class and give some upbeat suggestions about how to do well in this particular class. Encourage students with reminders that it really will get easier with more practice. Write some encouraging words on the

board on the day of the test something like "You can do this!" or "Rock this test!" Address your students as professional peers, "Good afternoon paramedics," "Good evening chemical engineers." Become a storyteller. I have a story, or real life example for probably at least 70% of the material I cover in my intro classes. Students say they are memorable that they really help their understanding. There's the one about the annoyed, mean old man on the block, who paid kids to make noise around his house. When this brilliant man stopped paying, they stopped playing and their conditioned response was extinguished. How about some enthusiasm? Students love it when you obviously love your content area and love sharing it with them. Show it. I begin almost every new module with "Oh, I love this chapter, wait untill you hear about this." This is my new reminder quote for myself: If you are passionate about your message, then tell your face. When I greet my students every day with "Good morning class," they are expected to say "Good morning, Kris." If their response is pretty anemic, I tease them and I make them repeat it till it's loud and clear. One class got so good at it, I recorded the whole thing and made it my new ringtone for a while. These little gestures show your students that you enjoy them, and that you enjoy teaching. When you express this, they often become more enjoyable to be around.

Tierney King 08:08
As you combine these different tactics of positivity and humor into your teaching. You might wonder, How do I effectively do this with my online teaching? You're all in little boxes on a screen, you're competing for student attention where they may have 20 browsers open and you'd never know, and it can be hard to convey your humor and optimism with technology. Your screen may freeze so you don't get a reaction. You might be on mute, you may have to type something out instead of speaking it which can change the intonation. In Michael Cundall's Magna Online Seminar, Using Humor and Levity to Enhance the Online Learning Environment, he explains how humor can still work in the online realm.

Michael Cundall 08:50
One thing that you got to realize like it or not, is that your class is in a sense a channel. Now it's a channel that they don't mean to to subscribe to, because they have to as a result of being in college, but you may want to go look at channels that have high levels of subscribers and see what sorts of things that they do on those channels that would make someone interested. Again, this is a performance in a sense. So take advantage of that. I'm not saying that you have to be the next internet influencer please, Lord, no. But there are ways that you can you can as you the individual, make the material interesting. What is it about the material that interested you when you got into it way back when either as an undergrad or in graduate school? Right? Find ways to make you, professor whomever, the person that they're thinking about in that class, not just the professor. So how can you craft that online presence? I think another question I want you to think about is how do you get students to think about what you want them to remember about you? And can you work those traits into the online presence? I do prefer a more informal route. I will use memes, and we'll get to those in a little bit. And I'll use images and this sort of thing as seen throughout the slides. Oftentimes playful images that aren't even necessarily related to the content, they're just playful, fun images, to keep you engaged. When we share laughs, when we share jokes, when we're smiling with one another, there's a word for that, we call it mirth. It's that warm feeling of camaraderie, when we're just kind of enjoying ourselves and playing around. And if you can create pockets of that, and it's really important that we talk about pockets of that in your class, in your digital class, in your online experience, you're going to have those persistency effects of the humor bleed over into other parts of what you're doing. When you use humor,

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pay attention to Poe's law. Just do a Google search, Poe's law, you can press pause, it's only one line long. But basically what Poe's law states is that when you're using humor online, especially in any sort of text-based communication, you have to be absolutely clear, overly clear, that you are using humor. And there are ways that we do this, okay. Now in a face-to-face class, I would pause or my body language would change. Or maybe the prosody of my voice would change to indicate that something new is coming, right? Or I would trail off. You know, there are all sorts of ways that we indicate face-to-face, how and what we're communicating if it's somewhat different than what the words might be taken to mean. Normally, we don't have that in the online space. So how do you solve that problem? What you're doing, when you're using humor in the classroom, whether it be face-to-face, or in the digital space, is that you're not going for comedy club laughs, you're not actually going for laugh out loud. Because that's not what's needed. What you want is what we do when we type in LOL on our phones, when we do the kind of the nasal exhalation or we cock our head and smile or maybe just a very, very small chuckle. Okay, it's not actually roll on the floor laughing. One of the difficulties for me, being someone who tells people and helps people learn how to use humor, or use humor in their teaching, is that I'm not a content area expert. I can't make a joke about communication studies, because I don't do that work. I hang out with them long enough, I may be able to come up with some some witty remarks, maybe. But I'm not going to be able to tell you what sorts of jokes work for you. But don't worry if you're at a loss at the beginning. Go out to the wonderful world of the Internet and find Reddit is a well known website. And they have memes out there for every possible topic - electrical engineers, industrial engineers, nursing. It's a place where you can start, okay? I'm saying this to tell you that these things will take time. You will find out what works for you and what doesn't work for you. You will find out the things that go flat. And the things that do well, give yourself some time to grow into this, especially if humor is not something that you've typically used before.

Tierney King 12:51
One specific element to potentially try out in your course is using Memes. Cundall says he uses memes for more than just humor in the classroom, but also to assess student learning.

Michael Cundall 13:02
I think that memes are a great tool and underutilized tool in the classroom, online or in the face-to-face classroom. And here are just three things that you can do with memes. Memes can assess student learning rather quickly. So if you have them working on a concept, or a difficult set of concepts in your class, have an assignment where they create a meme about that content. Having turned it in, when they turn it in as you grade them, you're going to be able to see with the content of the joke that they use in the meme what they understand of the material. I did one on meditation one, Descartes' famous meditation one, and most everyone was stopping at kind of midway between the first and the second major points. And there are two or three more beyond that. So that let me know that when I came to class the next day, I had to address that in the discussion section. So from all your memes, this is where your understanding is kind of bottoming out. But there's a whole lot more here. And then there were some memes that really clearly showed that they understood. The nice thing is if you find some really good memes, and you maybe make it a discussion board, have the students comment on which means they found the funniest. Keep those memes for the next time you teach that class because you're going to be borrowing their senses of humor, which might reach to your next classes better than yours would because again, they share a slightly different background. But remember, it's really

important that you cite your sources because you need to give credit to student B without violating FERPA. Use a meme in the class. Sometimes you can just throw the meme up there and ask them if they get the joke. And if a bunch of people don't get the joke, then you know, they don't understand the content. And the meme in the class can either be used as a diagnosis of where they're missing, or as a way to scaffold them into understanding, or both if it's really good. Memes and discussion boards, I think might be the saving graces for discussion boards, because it's something that they can you know, they trade memes. I think 75% of 18 to 35 year olds subscribe to a meme website, like a website that's just memes or a social media post. So they trade these things in ways that just boggle my mind and the volumes in which they get traded, so take advantage of that, right? Lean on it. And if they laugh at you for being the professor that's trying to look cool, we'll go with it. Don't worry, you're trying to get these certain sorts of things. So remember, memes can be an assessment, they can be a learning tool, and they can provide you with content that you can use later on.

Tierney King 15:31
Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.

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