

Make 'em Laugh: Using Humour in Training (Aug 07)

Dawn Smith looks at the link between humour and learning, and how laughter can be used in the training room to help make the message stick.



The use of laughter to aid learning is of course nothing new. The king of silly walks, John Cleese, helped to pioneer the use of humour in corporate training back in the 1970s, and probably laughed all the way to the bank earlier this year, when Video Arts - the video training company he helped to found - was sold to Tinopolis plc for £2.4m. But the power of humour is becoming increasingly valued in the business world, and there is a growing trend towards trainers and facilitators acquiring the skills that will help them to introduce humour into sessions as they see fit, rather than simply putting on a video and sitting back to watch.

Joe Hoare, who runs laughter facilitation courses for professionals who want to use humour in the workplace, has noticed a recent increase in the number of trainers from the corporate sector who want to learn how to use humour in their own sessions. "In the last few years there has been a steady stream of enquiries, but noticeably in the last 12 months the conversion rate has increased," he says. "These are soft skills and they are coming to be valued more and more by business."

Many of the trainers attending Joe's courses have already discovered that their best sessions include being light-hearted and spontaneous, he says. They have also realised that the positive effects of humour are greater if the facilitator is interacting with the delegates rather than merely playing a video. "The reason they come on the course is to develop knowledge to support their gut feeling that humour and lightness are beneficial," he says. "The course provides them with scientific and medical background on the link between humour and learning, as well as exercises for their own toolbox and ideas for ways to lighten their presentations in general."

The humour hypothesis

When it comes to the scientific background, various research has shown a positive link between humour and learning. In 1985, Powell and Andresen found that, "humour, provided it is not used to excess, can increase attention and interest and help to illustrate and reinforce what is being taught".

More recently, a study of *Humour in Adult Learning*, conducted in 1995 by Joyce Saltman of Columbia University, found that positive humour, particularly when relevant to the material, can, "help establish a climate conducive to adult learning, defuse stress, provide an effective message delivery system aiding retention of information, break down barriers between facilitators and learners, and foster cohesiveness."

However, not all the research into this area provides such positive results, and there is still some debate over how, and to what extent, humour aids learning. For example, in a series of studies conducted with Harvard students in the 1970s, Peter Desberg and colleagues found that humour which is irrelevant to the subject matter does not aid learning - only relevant humour does the trick. Of course, this echoes

other research that shows irrelevant material is unhelpful, however fun and interesting (e.g. Wade & Adams, 1990).

Perhaps more surprisingly, Desberg and his colleagues found that repeating information in a non-humorous way gives the same learning advantage as providing relevant, humorous content. This suggested that the repetition in the humorous material provided the learning boost, rather than the humour itself - not what the researchers expected. "We were a bit disappointed," says Desberg, an expert on instructional humour, currently teaching at California State University.

Despite this, Desberg is a firm advocate of humour in teaching and training, so long as it is used judiciously. In particular, he believes that the use of humorous anecdotes to illustrate difficult ideas can be beneficial. "There is really good evidence that people remember stories and jokes better than content," he says. "Story telling and metaphor helps people remember concepts more easily."

In addition, the right kind of humour can help to forge a positive connection between trainer and delegate, says Desberg, who has conducted research on how people judge others on the basis of their humour. Those whose humour is self-effacing, rather than hostile, are judged to be accessible. "This can be important in the training room," says Desberg. "In training, people in the audience feel very vulnerable." They are more likely to ask questions if the trainer seems accessible, he adds.

Spicing up dry subjects

Though humour and laughter are frequently used in ice-breaker sessions, team building exercises and energisers, there is no reason why it can't be applied to virtually any training situation. Gerry Thompson at Positive Comedy, which runs trainer sessions on using humour, says that humour can be applied successfully to the most serious subjects. He cites the example of a training session for senior managers in the Environment Agency, involving technical material. "I would call it 'dry' if it hadn't been about water," says Gerry. Even in this kind of technical session, the message can be helped across "by the trainer being an engaging and entertaining person," he says. "The material is not debased if the humour is introduced in an appropriate way."

In fact, humour is especially effective if the material is 'dry', says Doni Tamblyn, President of US-based HumorRules, which runs courses designed to help trainers use humour to support learning. For example, HumorRules consulted with a credit card company to make their customer service training more engaging. "The trainees had to learn about 150 pieces of jargon - 'Texp', 'MPD' etc. Nonsense words are one of the hardest things for the brain to hang onto," says Doni. Her company instituted a game called "Dr Truth" (similar to "Call my Bluff"), where delegates had to give one true and two false definitions of each term, but could get extra points for making their peers laugh. This playful approach aided retention. "The learners' supervisors told us they were doing much better back on the job than previous trainees," says Doni.

Make em laugh...

If humour is so versatile and effective, how can a trainer learn to be funny if that's not their natural style? Gerry Thompson at Positive Comedy advocates an improvisational approach. "Anyone can be funny," he says. "It's about being yourself

and being in the moment. If you work with the material in the moment, you can be improvisational and create humour." His workshops for trainers aim to develop their ability to be improvise on the spot, be spontaneous, creative, take risks and draw on personal resources. There is an emphasis on creating the same sort of atmosphere that children learn in - where they can be playful and creative. Participants also get to develop specific training activities which they can offer to others.

Joe Hoare also stresses the importance of spontaneity and being yourself, rather than trying to be funny. "When you get spontaneous lightness and spontaneous interaction, humour is naturally present," he says. A similar view is taken by Doni Tamblyn, who says: "Real humour is openness, optimism, and a kind of yes-saying to life. Humour is creativity. Humour is above all, play."

Avoid the pitfalls

As already hinted in this article, there are some important rules for using humour in the training room. The laughter gurus we spoke to stressed the following:

Don't try to be funny - just try to have fun. "Labouring to be witty can send a powerful inhibitory message to the mid-brain, where emotions originate, and diminish energy and spontaneity," says Doni Tamblyn. "The answer is to acquaint oneself with one's natural sense of play, and allow it unaffected expression."

Keep it positive. Humour that is negative, derisive or culturally inappropriate can actually have a negative impact on learning, according to the 1995 study by Joyce Saltman. It also makes you look bad. Hostile humour makes you seem inaccessible, warns Peter Desberg.

Show you can take it. "Always start by making fun of yourself," says Joe Hoare. "Until people see you can take it they won't take it from you". If you use self-effacing humour it will also make you appear more accessible, Desberg reminds us.

Don't necessarily use jokes, says Joe Hoare - and if you are not a practiced joke teller, definitely avoid them. However, as Peter Desberg points out, relevant humorous anecdotes and jokes can help to illustrate concepts, so for trainers who are comfortable with them they might be useful in appropriate situations. (Desberg is currently involved in developing interactive software for generating original jokes on any subject, which will be available later this year.)

Focus on the delegates. "Comedians who make the audience part of the show get bigger laughs," says Doni Tamblyn. "By the same token, teachers who share the spotlight generously find that their learners more willingly 'buy in' to the programme."

Stay in the moment, and be yourself. "Being really genuine allows people to engage with you," says Joe Hoare.

Humour is good for you too

Of course, there is a whole raft of evidence about the link between humour and wellbeing, so you'll gain physical and psychological benefits from a giggle in the training room if nothing else. But there is one final benefit of using humour that trainers may like to bear in mind. In the study mentioned earlier, about how people are judged on their humour, Peter Desberg and his colleagues found that people who use humour are seen as more intelligent, creative and competent than people who don't.

I say, I say, I say....

Contacts

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References & resources

Humour and Teaching in Higher Education, JP Powell and LW Andresen, Studies in Higher Education, Volume 10, Issue 1 1985, pages 79 - 90.

Humor in adult learning: A review of perceptions, Joyce M Saltman, 1995, Columbia University

Laugh and Learn: 95 Ways to Use Humor for More Effective Teaching and Training, by Doni Tamblyn, Amacom, 2002.

The Effects of Humor on Retention and Learning, P Desberg, P McGhee. D Hensche and J Barr, 1978, paper presented at the Second International Humor Conference, Los Angeles.

Courses for trainers

Laughter Facilitation Training, 29-30 September 2007, London. Details: www.joehoare.co.uk/lft.html

Training for Trainers: the Power of Comedy & Improvisation, 28 November 2007, Brighton. Details:

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