Enjoyable learning: The role of humour, games, and fun activities in nursing and midwifery education

Heather Baida \(^{a,*}\), Nicky Lambert \(^{b}\)

\(^{a}\) School of Nursing & Midwifery, University of Brighton, Westlain House, Village Way,Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9PH, United Kingdom

\(^{b}\) Practice Development Facilitator at Sussex Partnership Trust, United Kingdom

**Summary**

Education that captures the attention of students is an essential aspect of promoting meaningful, active learning. Rather than standing at the front of a group of learners simply speaking about a topic, teachers have the opportunity of livening up their teaching with humour, games, and other fun activities. This article critically evaluates the benefits and limitations of humour within nursing education as well as the use of games and fun activities as teaching strategies. Examples of various games and interactive activities are also provided.

**Introduction**

Nursing and midwifery students have become accustomed to living in a fast-paced, highly technological world where audiovisual stimulation is constant and an abundance of new knowledge is easily accessible via multimedia and the Internet. Nurse educators are thus challenged to teach in a manner that catches the interest of students and maintains their motivation to learn. One way teachers can draw students into a learning experience is by using humour and enjoyable, interactive activities.

The purpose of this article is to explore the positive and negative effects of laughter in the classroom. ‘Fun’ teaching strategies will also be examined including various techniques and activities teachers can use for large or small group lectures, seminars, clinical teaching, and e-learning. Educational theory will be integrated throughout this paper in order to support the discussion with recommendations from the nursing literature about humour and fun in education.

**Humour in education**

The issue of humour in education is a heatedly debated topic and concerns around the use of laughter to aid learning have been present for a long time. It is a societal norm for comedians and celebrities to rely on comedy within documentaries and training videos to liven up so called ‘dry’ subjects. Within clinical practice, nurses are accustomed to using humour as a coping mechanism to relieve tension and to help ‘humanise’ the health care experience for themselves as care givers as well as for their patients and families (Dean and Major, 2008; McCreaddie, 2008; McCreaddie and Wiggins, 2008). The use of humour by a teacher can set people at ease particularly in anxiety-provoking environments and helps to reduce the power differential between students and staff (Shatz and LoSchiavo, 2006).

Powell and Andresen (1985) recognise other benefits of using humour in education such as helping students to understand, focussing their attention, diffusing distress and anger, creating a positive attitude towards the task and teacher, and reducing anxiety. They found that empirical studies about the connection between humour and learning indicated humour, in moderation, increased attention and interest and created a more positive learning experience. Horng et al. (2005) cited a sense of humour as an essential personality trait for a creative teacher. A study by Saltman (1995) revealed that positive humour, especially when relevant to the subject matter, promoted learning because it established a climate conducive to adult learning, defused stress, aided memory, united facilitators and learners, and fostered cohesiveness.

There are arguments though that expectations put on teachers to be ‘amusing’ are less than helpful and detract from the message being delivered – it may be that humour is not a magic bullet. Pedagogical humour with an underpinning educational purpose should thus be differentiated from irrelevant comedy.

Moran and Hughes (2006) found that using humour with social work students correlated to lower stress levels. However, simply liking humour showed no such link; it may be that the support borne of making jokes and working in a light-hearted atmosphere was more important in reducing stress than the humour itself.
The infamous ‘Dr. Fox’ lecture was a research project carried out in 1973 by Naftulin et al. (1973) where an actor was coached to deliver an entertaining but ultimately empty teaching session. This demonstrated the dangers of ‘educational seduction’. The lecture was rated highly by the recipients, one of whom claimed to have read the Doctor’s previous works! It appears that one of the limitations of using humour as a teaching strategy is the creation of a false sense of satisfaction in students when in reality, very little educational value has been achieved.

Bryant et al. (1980) found there were interesting gender dynamics in students who took part in their study on the use of humour by college lecturers. The students tended to view male professors who frequently used humour as more appealing, better presenters and superior teachers than those who did not use humour. The small number of women instructors in the study who frequently used humour received lower effectiveness ratings. This gender difference was not replicated in a larger study by Gorham and Christophel (1990); it may be that times had changed or the women in the first study were just not that amusing!

Ziegler (1998) highlighted the difficulty in empirically proving that humour actually aids teaching and learning. He focused on medical teaching and stated that there are roughly equal numbers of studies on both the positive and negative effects of humour in student learning. He observed how humour is used widely in medical teaching but also recognised the lack of research on the subject in relation to health care education.

Whatever one’s opinions on the usefulness of humour in education, there are some caveats surfacing from the available literature. Humour is most effective when it is appropriate to the setting and style of the teacher and when it has an emphasis on ‘having fun’ rather than ‘being funny’ (Morrison, 2008; Tamblyn, 2002). Skinner (2001) stipulated that humour must have a pedagogical purpose otherwise it has no relevance for learning even if students are laughing and enjoying themselves. In other words. “Humour should be neither gratuitous nor excessive, but judicious” (Skinner, 2001, p. 53).

The inappropriate use of humour can make for a hostile learning environment that quickly destroys learning opportunities, trust, communication and self-esteem (Loomans and Kolberg, 1993). When a student is the target of ridicule, humour becomes bullying, has a negative effect on the entire class and causes the teacher to appear unprofessional and unsupportive. Clearly, derisive or culturally inappropriate humour will also have a negative impact on learning (Saltman, 1995). According to Berk (2009), derogatory and cynical humour can be considered verbal abuse which is not only disrespectful and dehumanising for students but also for patients if used within clinical teaching. Positive use of humour generates positive results and a negative use, predictably creates a disastrous teaching environment.

Fun in education

One way of injecting humour into education is to utilize games or other fun activities as teaching strategies. This moves away from the traditional, teacher-centered, ‘talk and chalk’ lecture delivered in a didactic manner where students are passive listeners to the information being imparted on them (Race, 2002). Instead, humour can be used with a humanistic approach which has a greater emphasis on active learning. Students are then motivated to interact and to be engaged throughout the learning process in a way that is meaningful for them (Chapman, 2008; Rogers, 1983).

Facilitating active learning helps students to learn new knowledge and skills in a way that is both challenging and enjoyable. Humorous education where learning is perceived as fun promotes direct student participation and prevents the dreaded ‘death by PowerPoint’ situation whereby students tune out or are listening without actually learning anything. If students consider a lecture to be enjoyable, they will be more interested and motivated to learn which is fundamental for adult learning (Knowles et al., 2005).

In addition, fun activities can be planned to encourage a deep rather than surface level of learning offering a greater impact on the learning experience for students (Biggs, 2003). For example, a game can be used to teach theory while at the same time help students to develop skills in debate, critical thinking, clinical reasoning, resolution, and prioritization. Uhles et al. (2008) suggested games with a direct purpose of teaching about a specific topic not only allows for learning of the desired content but also brings about indirect and often unexpected benefits such as participants learning about communication, collaboration, and leadership. Games are therefore one way of facilitating active learning as ‘fun’ education (Beylefeld and Struwig, 2007; Bochennre et al., 2007; Foreman, 2004; Premkumar and Bonnycastle, 2006; Royse and Newton, 2007).

Modern technology provides teachers with a variety of other methods for planning fun, interactive activities keeping the teaching fresh, current, and interesting. This can be enhanced by combining multiple forms of media together (multimedia) such as text, graphics, images, animation, audio and video (Eskicioglu and Kopec, 2003). Within a PowerPoint presentation, funny jokes, quotations or cartoons can be used (see Tables 1 and 2) although caution should be taken to receive copyright permission while obtaining images or text from the Internet. DVD or audio sounds can be integrated into a game or other fun activities. Similarly, the Internet can be accessed and displayed adding another dimension to information used during a game. Finally, simulation of a clinical scenario can be achieved through a patient simulator or other types of clinical equipment (Bantz et al., 2007). A scenario can also be used within a game either as demonstration or including interaction from the students bringing about experiential, hands-on learning (Kolb, 1984).

E-learning has increasingly been used to complement lectures through ‘blended learning’ (Bersin, 2004; Bonk et al., 2006) or for online courses and self-directed study (Bach et al., 2007; Ward and Moule, 2007). Teachers can infuse humour and plan fun activities into the teaching strategies for e-learning just as they would do for classroom lectures. Opportunities for enjoyable online learning have expanded with the development of Web 2.0 technology (Boulos et al., 2006) including wikis, blogs, podcasts, document sharing services, and RSS feeds (see Table 3 for a glossary of these types of terms related to online resources). Teachers can easily direct their students to free websites offering fun learning activities that use Web 2.0 technology or can develop their own e-learning resources. Web 2.0 is the next generation of the World Wide Web which not only imparts information but also allows for enhanced creativity, information sharing and group collaboration (O’Reilly, 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Websites for cartoons.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.nurstoon.com/">http://www.nurstoon.com/</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.cartoonresource.com/nursing_1.htm">http://www.cartoonresource.com/nursing_1.htm</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/N/Nursing.asp">http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/N/Nursing.asp</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Websites for quotations.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.amusingquotes.com/">http://www.amusingquotes.com/</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.poemofquotes.com/funny-quotes/">http://www.poemofquotes.com/funny-quotes/</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.quotationspage.com/">http://www.quotationspage.com/</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An example of Web 2.0 technology is the well known website YouTube™ (www.youtube.com) providing teachers with educational videos of both a serious and humorous nature (Burke and Snyder, 2008; Burke et al., 2009). In recent years, students have also begun posting their own self-made videos (Skiba, 2007a) where a topic they are learning about is turned into a song or theatrical sketch. Teachers can utilize these student-made videos within their teaching strategies demonstrating that the website facilitates learning at a variety of levels starting with the students who made the videos and continuing on while other students watch them at a later date. Alternatively, teachers can develop their own educational materials to be posted either through open source sites such as YouTube™ or through their institution’s virtual learning environment.

Moodle is a free, open source virtual learning environment created by educators for educators using pedagogical principles to guide the website design (Kaminski, 2005). The stated philosophy of Moodle includes a constructivist and social constructionist approach to education, emphasising that learners as well as teachers contribute to the educational process (Moodle, 2009). Moodle’s features reflect this in various design aspects, such as by making it possible for students to comment on entries in a database or to work collaboratively in a wiki or blog (see Table 3).

Second life (Linden Research, 2009) is a further example of Web 2.0 technology that can be used for fun educational purposes as a multi-user, virtual world for teachers and students to interact in (Boulos et al., 2007; Kemp, 2006; Skiba, 2007b). Second life has been integrated with the Moodle learning management system to become ‘Sloodle’ (Sloodle, 2009). Sloodle maintains educational theory within its foundation and allows for purposeful, online games and fun activities to occur within a three dimensional, virtual world.

Although technology has provided these new and interesting ways of offering education, there are limitations such as the finances needed for adequate hardware and software, the training required for both teachers and students to use the technology, how not all learning styles suit e-learning, and how some practical skills are difficult to teach and learn electronically (Haugen et al., 2001).

Whether for a classroom lecture, seminar, or e-learning session, games and other fun activities should fit into a structured teaching plan otherwise they run the danger of being ‘entertainment’ rather than education. A game may be very enjoyable but not actually challenge students to learn anything. As a starting point, the teacher can consider the level of the topic being taught in terms of content and complexity (Moon, 2005). The educational level will depend on whether students are studying at diploma, degree, or Masters level (SEEC, 2003) with level descriptors guiding the development of the session’s aim and learning outcomes (Moon, 2005). As with any other teaching strategy, a game should be planned in a way that facilitates students to achieve these specific learning outcomes. Further guidance for planning games in relation to desired learning outcomes can come from Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1964) which categorizes learning into the domains of cognitive knowledge, psychomotor skills, and attitude (see Fig. 1).

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary of terminology for online resources.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wikis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blogs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Podcasts</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Document sharing services</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RSS feeds</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Cognitive Domain: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation](image1)

![Affective Domain: awareness, interest, attitude, appreciation, values, emotional bias](image2)

![Psychomotor Domain: manipulation of material and objects, neuromuscular coordination, motor skill](image3)

**Fig. 1.** Bloom’s Taxonomy of learning (Bloom et al., 1964).

### Table 4

#### Quiz game

- Split a large group up into a number of smaller groups
- Groups can identify a team name using the main topic as a theme
- Ask questions to the groups according to the style of a game show (e.g. Jeopardy, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Family Feud) or in a similar fashion to a pub quiz where all questions are given to each group and results reviewed at the end of the game
- Incorporate video links, audio sounds, Internet websites, case scenarios, or simulation into the questions
- Offer prizes at the end of the game

*This game can be used at the beginning of a teaching session as an ice breaker and a way to assess the current knowledge level of the learners. It can also be used at the end of the session as a review of the taught content and evaluation of the learning achieved from the session.*

### Table 5

#### Pieces of advice activity

- Following the teaching of a new clinical skill, give each student a list of numbered blank spaces from 1 to 3
- Ask students to identify three pieces of advice they would give to someone about to do this skill for the first time

*This activity is best used at the end of a teaching session, it encourages students to recall the information they have been given, incorporate it with previous knowledge and organise it in terms of importance.*
Richardson, 2008). Recent medical education research by Selby et al. (2007) demonstrated that an interactive lecture improved learning than those used by teachers when they were students. Students learn theoretical information or practical skills from the content of a game but fun activities may also have a variety of other benefits. At the beginning of an educational session, a game can act as an ice breaker, particularly if the students do not know each other. Any activity that allows for people to get up and physically move around the room will break up a presentation style of lecture and prevent long periods of time sitting in a chair. Activities which have students working in groups will encourage team building and promote peer learning where students can learn from each other. Games that require students to answer questions will show whether learning outcomes for a session have been met and can therefore act as an informal method of assessment. Finally, concluding activities will allow students to review their current knowledge and consolidate new knowledge to a deeper level. See Tables 4–7 for examples of various types of educational games.

Although games do offer a number of advantages, there are also disadvantages to consider prior to jumping in and initiating a game with a group of students. Games do not suit all learning styles, some students may choose not to cooperate, competition to win may overtake motivation to learn, and the group size and physical environment may not be ideal for some activities (Graham and Richardson, 2008). Recent medical education research by Selby et al. (2007) demonstrated that an interactive lecture improved short term retention of knowledge when compared with a game although neither teaching strategy was shown to be significantly different than the other for encouraging longer term learning.

Conclusion

Today's students have experiences of interactive learning that could be quite different from that of their lecturers. There is increasingly less hierarchy in the class room and the current styles of gathering and passing information are often more peer and group orientated. Nurse educators have the opportunity to work in more diverse ways and to incorporate different approaches to learning than those used by teachers when they were students.

The appropriate use of humour, games and fun activities as part of teaching will continue to be a thorny topic with ongoing debate. It is clear though that a number of themes run through the literature: fun in education must be meaningfully linked to the topic if it is to provide a useful learning experience, humour must be acceptable to the group, and all teaching strategies must be delivered with friendly intent and for positive reasons.

Teachers can be placed under pressure to conform to stereotypes from both sides of the argument, to present either as stern and didactic or as comedic and wacky. Teaching is an intensely personal activity and in many ways much like nursing – you deliver it from within ‘yourself’; by using the skills you have as a person, be they extraversion and dynamism or gentleness and ability to hear others. A ‘chalk and talk’ lecture delivered by someone who is interested in the subject will be better and more fun than an interesting technical display by someone who is bored. The ongoing technological developments in the field of education provide increased opportunities to make sessions more interactive and introduce humour and fun – however, using fun activities, humour, games and new technologies can only ever be as effective as the educator who employs them.

References


Rogers, C., 1983. Freedom to learn for the 80's. Merrill, Columbus OH.


