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Laughing makes learning better

Education is becoming less and less 'serious' by trying to integrate play and humour. In this article we understand why.

Laughter is a fundamental tool in interpersonal relationships that can improve individual and group well-being. There is still too little laughter in education, as if laughter were synonymous with superficiality. However, for educators and the scientific community, using humour and creativity does not simply mean wasting time, but using a tool of enormous relational value to optimise the training experience. Indeed, humour and creativity can open up new perspectives in work situations, making tense moments lighter. For these reasons, the eLearning industry is trying to incorporate these elements into the training experience. In this article, we will look at how humour can enhance the learning experience in this industry and what are some tips for incorporating humour into training.

A serious matter

The authors of the book **Humour, Seriously: Why Humour is a Superpower at Work and in Life**, send us the strong message that **humour makes us more competent and confident, strengthens relationships and increases resilience in difficult times**.
It is important to note that we are talking about humour and not irony, another element that makes us laugh but is not always useful for training. Let us try to clarify: humour is characterised by lightness and innocence, while irony focuses on the subject's point of view and can be divisive. In fact, the book explains that it is the lightness, rather than the actual comedy, that makes the difference. This means that one does not need to tell a series of hilarious jokes to gain the benefits of humour. It is enough to be open to a smile, to laughter, to seeing the funny side of something by making an amusing comment or a pun, both to offer these things to myself and to be open to receive them from others. In fact, the book says that 'lightness is a mindset, an intrinsic state of receptivity to joy (and of actively seeking it)'.

Humour is thus the superpower mentioned in the book's title and has strong implications for education. In short, humour has the power to help us in the following activities:

- Focusing and engaging in the moment
- Remembering long-term information
- Feeling psychologically secure
- Being more creative and innovative
- Being emotionally resilient and avoiding burnout

Game-based learning

The concept of play-based learning is not new. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was one of the most famous psychologists and educationalists who helped develop the idea that play is fundamental to children's cognitive development. Although Piaget's vision did not extend to adult learning, today there is much research demonstrating the benefits of play, both physical and intellectual, on the brains of adults and the elderly.

The authors of Humour, Seriously cite an interesting study published in the Journal of Experimental Education that showed that students who were taught training material with humour stored information better, scoring 11% higher on final exams. Thus, learning content with a sense of playfulness and levity will help students focus more on the information at the time of consumption and remember it better later on.

In another study, entitled " **The educational power of humour on student engagement in online learning environments**", researchers obtained some rather interesting results. They found that the addition of humorous elements to learning material had benefits for students and improved:

- Behavioural engagement
- Cognitive engagement
- Emotional engagement

Regarding **behavioural engagement**, the addition of humour showed positive effects on student engagement, such as on-time delivery of tasks, their active and passive participation and their ability to follow the material. With regard to **cognitive engagement**, the researchers found that humour was associated with increased recall of information, self-discipline and increased sharing of information with classmates. The researchers noted that humour was also associated with better **emotional engagement** with the material as it had a positive effect on students' attention and motivation, their enjoyment of the course and reduced their boredom while completing assignments.
The study also noted some negative effects. Although the addition of funny elements to the quizzes seemed to help keep students engaged with the task at hand, these students showed **worse time management** than students in the control group with no 'gag' answers or other humorous aspects added.

Overall, the study noted that adding humour to courses can help students not get bored and make them actively participate in learning. Although the use of humour should be balanced in the preparation of learning tasks to avoid distracting students or negatively affecting their time management, it should be implemented in more courses to keep students engaged.

Using empathy in learner-centred design

The empathy and connection needed to create a sense of levity or playfulness overlaps with the empathy that underlies learner-centred design.
Interestingly, the product design field distinguishes between 'user-centred design' and '**individual-centred design**', particularly in relation to the issue of empathy. **Kent State University** states that 'User-centred design could be considered as a less emotionally empathetic approach, focusing primarily on the tangible and physiological ways in which users interact with a platform, whereas individual-centred design also incorporates their emotional or psychological preferences'.
Perhaps a human-centred approach to learning that incorporates emotional and psychological preferences is the way forward and perhaps the deeper question we can ask ourselves is: how can we best express empathy and explicitly show the connection between educator and learner

Why it matters now

The way we work or study and manage our time to do these activities has been changed by the COVID-19 pandemic.
These changes have led to remote and hybrid work and anyone who has worked during this period knows the consequences of this revolution such as a lack of engagement, boredom, lack of 'full' social interactions and so on. All these changes, although positive, have created the need to strive more than ever to establish a human relationship and to maintain and nurture a positive work culture. These changes, in fact, are not going away entirely because they have several advantages that students, educators and companies are not willing to give up. Gamification', i.e. the introduction of game elements into training, is one of the areas in which eLearning leaders are investing significantly and which is becoming increasingly important in the development of eLearning products for two reasons:

- because it increases engagement, which is one of the main problems in the industry, and
- because it can benefit from existing and easily applicable technologies for training that come from the world of video games.

How to incorporate humour into courses

This is all well and good in theory, but what does it mean in practice? How do you incorporate humour into teaching content? Here are some tips for using humour effectively in eLearning courses or online training events:

- **Research your audience to assess culture, experience and personality.**
  People with different backgrounds and experiences, both personal and professional, have different ideas about what is funny and what is inappropriate. For this reason, you are likely to have to research your audience's background to find out what their definition of humour is.

- **Do not let humour overshadow the topic.**
  When using humour, emphasise the main content and make it funnier, but it should never steal the show and become a distraction. Use humour in moderation so that you do not lose credibility and so that your learners can see the benefits or real-world applications of your eLearning course.
- **Create funny stories and examples to highlight the topic.**
  Instead of just reciting a long list of facts or concepts that you want your learners to acquire and absorb, you can offer them stories or real-life examples that highlight the subject matter.
- **Maintain a cheerful and motivating tone.**
  One of the most valuable tips on how to use humour in eLearning is to maintain a positive and inspiring tone. Avoid using vulgar, self-deprecating or any other kind of humour that has a negative tone or connotation. If you risk offending someone in any way or making them feel even remotely uncomfortable, it is best to leave it alone.
- **Where you use humour is as important as how you use it.**
  Knowing where and when to use humour in the course of an eLearning course is crucial. An eLearning product that consists mainly of humour will not offer the same value to your learners. For this reason, you must use humour wisely so as to maintain the true value of the overall eLearning experience without becoming vulgar and without losing the learners' concentration.

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