

TexTESOL 2018 State Conference



Breaking Barriers

Discovering Pathways to Student Success

Humor in the Classroom: The State of the Art

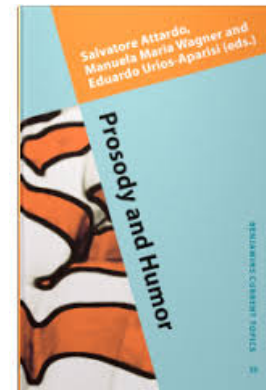
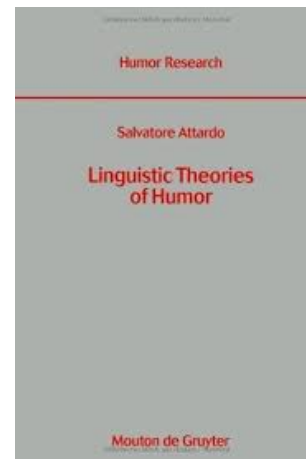
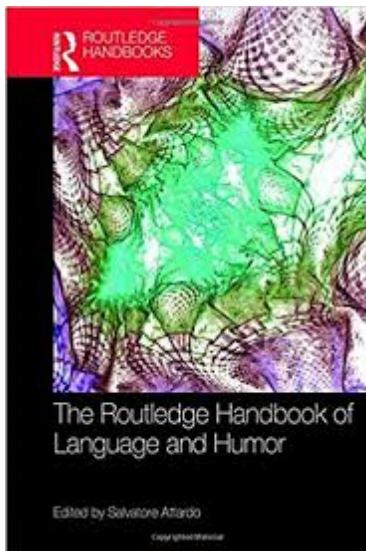
Salvatore Attardo

TAMUC

2018

What gives me the right to speak?

- 10 years as editor-in-chief *HUMOR: International journal of humor research*



Outline

- Does humor facilitate learning?
 - Not that we know of but, since you're going to keep doing it anyway
- How to be funny in the classroom, a practical guide
- How to find another job after they fire you
 - Just kidding! See *that* is humor.

Part 1

- “Does humor facilitate learning?” is in fact a complex question:
 - Does it make easier to acquire new information?
 - For example by lowering barriers to learning
 - Does it improve retention?
 - Is humorous information more memorable?
 - Does it improve the pedagogical experience?
 - Of the learner?
 - Of the teacher?

What do we know?

- Several meta-analyses
 - Bell and Pomeranz 2016
 - Banas, Dunbar, Liu, Rodriguez (2011)
 - Martin et al. 2006
 - McMorris, Boothroyd & Pietrangelo (1997)
- I will be working off chapter 16 (Humor in the classroom) of my new book Introduction to the Linguistics of Humor (2019, Oxford University Press)

Outline of this section

- The pioneers
- The apologists
- The realists
- Classroom Discourse Analysis
- Conclusions

The pioneers

- Early studies, created the meme that humor facilitates learning
- Markiewicz (1974);
 - First meta-analysis: few studies show positive results.
 - No effects on retention or persuasion, but positive evaluation of the source.
- Kaplan and Pascoe (1977);
 - concepts introduced with humor retained significantly better
- Ziv (1979; 1988)
 - increased creativity; “appropriate” amount of humor
- Bryant & Zillmann and associates (1979-1989)
 - Humorous cartoons improve liking but not effectiveness of textbooks
 - humor does not improve testing (not even anxiety)

The apologists

- There exists a small cottage industry of books (and articles) touting the benefits of using humor in the classroom, such as:
 - Berk: Professors are from Mars, students are from snickers
 - Ortman: The teacher's book of wit
 - Shade: License to laugh: Humor in the classroom
 - Lundberg & Thurston: If they are laughing they just may be listening
 - Loomans and Kolberg: The laughing classroom
 - Medgyes: Laughing matters: Humour in the language classroom
- Halula (2013)'s assessment: the literature "about humor and education [is] typically anecdotal and prescriptive in nature with little or no research backing" (p. 118)

The realists (meta-analyses)

- Bell and Pomeranz 2016
 - “it has been difficult to connect the use of humor to increased learning”
 - “the most robust argument for using humor in education is affective” (p. 101).
- Banas, Dunbar, Liu, Rodriguez (2011)
 - “Instructional humor that is appropriate and positive may be an effective tool at *increasing teacher evaluations and helping create a positive classroom environment* (...) However, the empirical evidence for the effects of humor on learning is considerably more *mixed*, with some scholars finding that humor enhances learning (...) and others finding no relationship between learning from humor” (131) [my emphasis; SA]
- Martin et al. 2006
 - 22 studies considered
 - “Although students report enjoying learning and they report that they believe they have learned course material, objective measurements of the recall associated with humorous lectures are rather minuscule” (305)
- McMorris, Boothroyd & Pietrangelo (1997)
 - 11 studies on college testing; Psychology undergraduates
 - Conclusions: insufficient evidence that use of humor in testing reduces stress
 - Humor does not improve performance
 - However, the students report that they like it

Classroom Discourse Analysis

- Broad topic, so we touch only on some issues
- Humor happens in the classroom all the time, whether we like it or not
 - Safe house (marginal activities, such as passing notes, chatting, etc.)
- How much laughter occurs?
 - Numerous studies, very broad range: from zero laughter per lecture to 2.8 laughs per minute.
 - Not only between teacher variation, but also variation by time (beginning of semester > middle > end), type of class (tutorial > lectures), and cross-culturally (US > UK)
 - Award-winning teachers have more laughter per lecture. (Javidi et al. 1988)

My conclusions

- Most of the literature is anecdotal
 - “Hey, this worked for me, in my class, with my students, in my college, so surely, it will work for you, a different person, in a different class, with different students, in a different school.”
 - 1st, don’t call me Shirley
 - 2nd what could possibly go wrong with that scenario?
- Most of the arguments in favor of using humor in teaching are affective (i.e., people like it).

Negative sides of humor

- Variation of what people find humorous
 - Personality differences
 - Cultural differences (e.g., L2 speakers, Bell and Attardo 2010)
- Lots of humor is (mildly or strongly) aggressive or provocative and/or uses taboo language
 - ❗ Hence, there's a good probability that **it will offend someone**
- Failed humor means loss of face
- Humor is paratelic (non-goal oriented) and classroom/study time is keyed as telic

Relatively underexplored area

- Humor is a complex construct
 - E.g., positive/negative humor
 - Relevant to the subject or not
 - Placement of the humor (e.g., in text, before, after)
- Teaching is a complex construct: teaching online vs F2F
- Variation in appreciation of humor
 - Gender issues (e.g., women and self-deprecating humor)
 - Class issues (e.g. humor about taboo subjects)
 - Do we laugh at the same things our students laugh at?
 - Shifts in the forms of humor
 - memes, reaction clips, embarrassment humor/cringe comedy, “onion” news
- Voluntary vs. involuntary humor
 - involuntary humor implies a loss of control on the part of the speaker (commonly the teacher)
 - If teachers engage in humor in the classroom, they key the situation as appropriate for humor and hence they raise the probability that the students may laugh *at* them.

Overall Conclusion

- Humor in the classroom is like sex among porcupines
- You should do it carefully
- But it can be a lot of fun
- especially if you're a porcupine.



Part 2: How to be funny, a practical guide

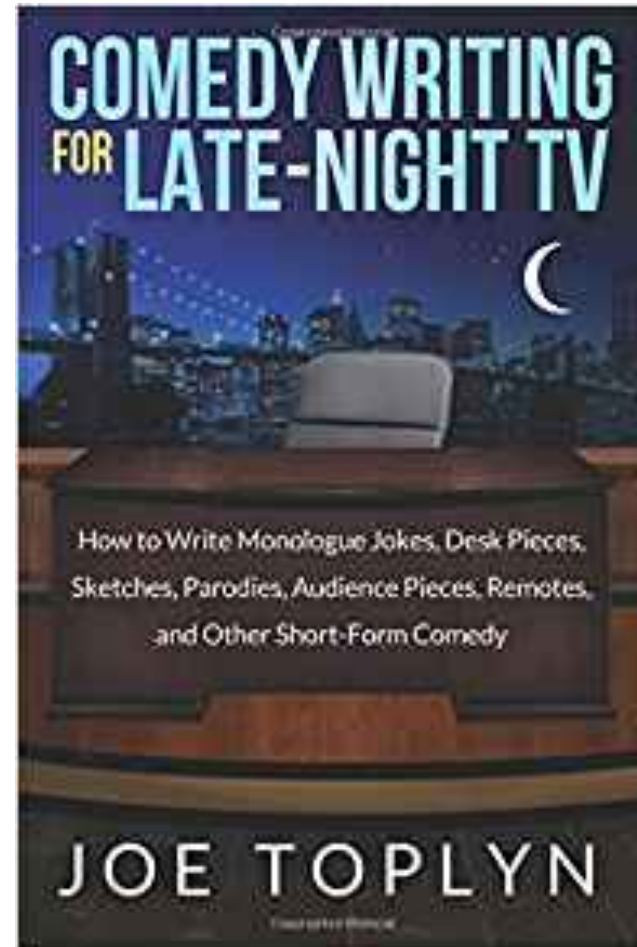
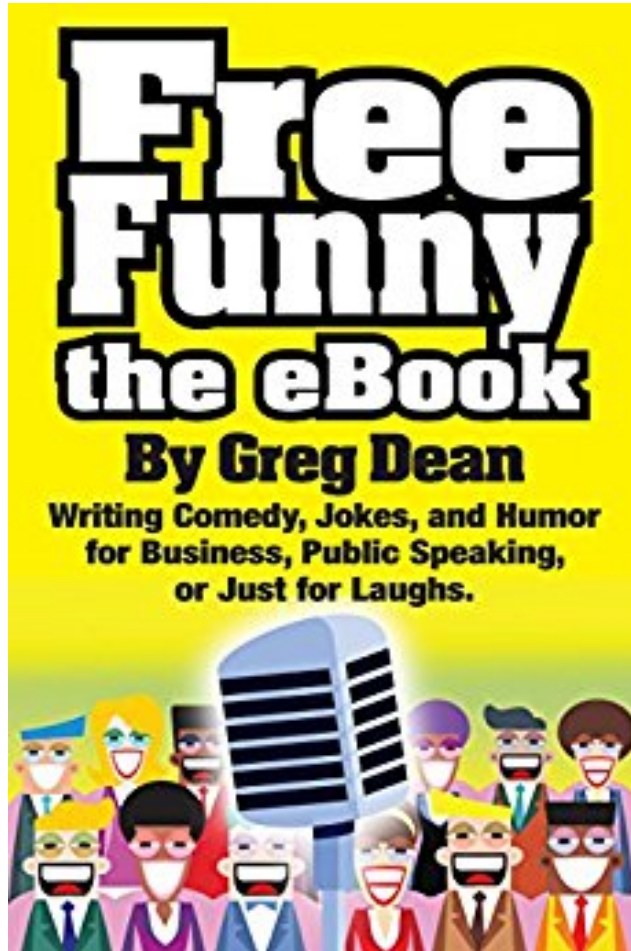
- Generating humor
- Incongruity
 - Two things that don't go together are funny
 - It's more complicated, but it's a start
- Build on that
 - How did the elephant get there?
 - Did the North Pole melt?
- Enjoy and seek out humor yourself



Books on comedy writing

- There exists a wide range of books on advice for would-be comedians
- Most of the advice is terrible
- But there are exceptions
- Greg Dean: *Step by step to Standup Comedy* (2000, Heinemann 0-325-00179-0)
- Joe Toplyn: *Comedy Writing for Late-night TV*, NY, Twenty Lane Media. 2014.

More on writing humor





- Plan your humor ahead
 - Don't use too much humor (Ziv)
- Humor doesn't "just happen"
- OK, sometimes it does, but that is rare.
 - Have jokes ready
 - Remember: to your students it's new
 - Unless they are repeating the class...
 - Find relevant material/humor
 - Foreign language texts
 - Examples of syntax/morphology
 - Cartoons on the subject (google images)

Example: humor in the classroom search



Techniques

- Repetition
 - You probably find a joke is not funny the second time around
 - On the contrary, repetition with variation is a crucial source of humor
- Recycle humor
 - “my god!” joke
 - Keep track of jokes that worked and reuse them
- Goofing around.
 - Do not take yourself seriously (if you can afford not to)

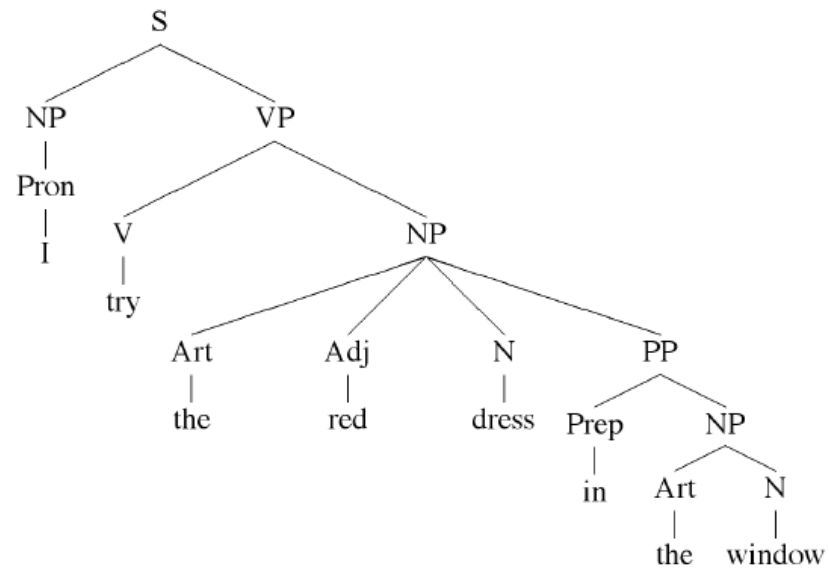
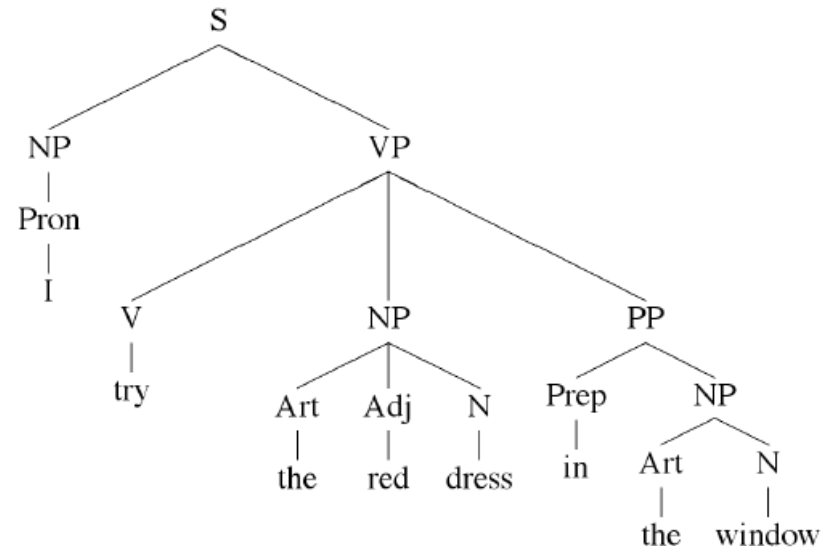
More suggestions

- Use non-aggressive humor (or humor that targets universally hated subjects, e.g., administrators*)
 - ❗ Be careful, a lot of humor is aggressive.
 - Irony/sarcasm is mostly aggressive
 - Choose your targets wisely
- Use self-deprecating humor
 - If you are a man;
 - ❗ avoid if you are a woman.
- Use humor to diffuse anxiety or change the pace of the class
 - Use humor for breaks
 - Use humor to redirect: “the short break joke”
- Involve the students
 - Ask *them* to contribute jokes, cartoons, etc.
 - ❗ Caveat: they may bring inappropriate humor and lose track of the goal
 - Have a straight man/woman
 - Relinquish control (risky!)
 - Attendance taking at YSU

* I was one for 10 years. If my dean reads this: “Just kidding! Please don’t fire me...”

Using humor in materials

- Use relevant, on task material
- Example: teaching syntactic ambiguity by prepositional phrase attachment
- Customer: “I want to try the red dress in the window.”
- Clerk: “Ma’am, we have dressing rooms for that!”



Pros and cons of on-task humorous material

- Works best, students like it most, gets higher opinion from students
- Avoids the “wasting time” objection
- Expensive to collect: time investment, acquiring videos, cartoons, etc. storage and retrieval
- Topical humor may not age well

Practical guide: the Caveat section

- Don't overdo it
 - You don't have to be funny all the time
- Avoid using humor in tests
- Read your audience
 - No really...
- You may just not be that funny...
 - He's not that into you
- You WILL offend someone



Thank you!

- Check out the conference web site or contact me for copies of the slides
- Or if you want more info on any of our programs at TAMUC
- Or you want to attend the North East Texas Humor Conference, in March 2019 or the International Society of Humor Studies in Austin (June 2019)
- Or if you just want to shoot the breeze...
- Salvatore.Attardo@tamuc.edu

References

- Banas, J. A., Dunbar, N., Rodriguez, D., & Liu, S. J. (2011). A review of humor in educational settings: Four decades of research. *Communication Education, 60*(1), 115-144.
- Bell, N., & Pomerantz, A. (2016). *Humor in the Classroom: A Guide for Language Teachers and Educational Researchers*. New York: Routledge.
- Bryant, J., Alan, D. B., Silberberg, R., & Elliott, S. M. (1981). Effects of humorous illustrations in college textbooks. *Human Communication Research, 8*(1), 43-57.
- Bryant, J., Comisky, P., & Zillmann, D. (1979). Teachers? Humor in the college classroom. *Communication Education, 28*(2), 110-118.
- Bryant, J. & Zillmann, D. (1989). Using humor to promote learning in the classroom. In P. McGhee & M. Frank (Eds.), *Humor and children's development* (pp. 49-78). New York: Routledge.
- Halula, S. P. (2013). What role does humor in the higher education classroom play in student-perceived instructor effectiveness? (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Marquette University.
- Javidi, M.M., Downs, V.C., & Nussbaum, J.F. (1988). A comparative analysis of teachers' use of dramatic style behaviors at higher and secondary educational levels. *Communication Education, 37*, 278-288.
- Kaplan, R. M., & Pascoe, G. C. (1977). Humorous lectures and humorous examples: Some effects upon comprehension and retention. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 69*(1), 61-65.
- Markiewicz, D. (1974). Effects of humor on persuasion. *Sociometry, 37*(3), 407-422.
- Martin, D. M., Preiss, R. W., Gayle, B. M., & Allen, M. (2006). A meta-analytic assessment of the effect of humorous lectures on learning. *Classroom communication and instructional processes: Advances through meta-analysis, 295-313*.
- McMorris, R. F., Boothroyd, R. A., & Pietrangelo, D. J. (1997). Humor in educational testing: A review and discussion. *Applied Measurement in Education, 10*(3), 269-297.