

So This Funny Thing Happened in Class...

A Study on Humour, Student-Teacher Immediacy, and Perceived Teacher-Efficacy

Capstone Project

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### **Abstract**

This phenomenological study examines how and why college instructors intentionally use humour in their classrooms, and explores their perceptions of its effects on their student-teacher relationships, and perceived levels of teacher-efficacy. This study attempts to answer a central research question, “How do college instructors intentionally use humour to create student-teacher immediacy, and how do they perceive this impacts their effectiveness as teachers?” Responses to key questions are satisfied through one-on-one interviews with experienced, full-time faculty, at a single Community College in Ontario.

Study results indicate that study participants, despite significant variance in the myriad humour types used in the classroom, perceive that pedagogical humour is essential to the creation of a healthier, more positive teaching-learning environments, and is indispensable in increasing student-teacher immediacy, and enhancing instructors’ self-perceptions of teaching effectiveness. The study suggests increasing the availability of professional development opportunities for faculty pertaining to practices and methodologies around incorporating humour into teaching in higher education settings, and concludes that although humour appears vital in the creation of effective teaching-learning constructs, it is chronically under-researched. Ten areas of future scholarly inquiry are suggested in the hopes of increasing the extent body of knowledge pertaining to the applicability of humour as a pedagogical teaching tool in higher education, and its effects on student-teacher immediacy and instructor-perceived teaching efficacy.

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In this life we are all just walking up the mountain,  
and we can sing as we climb, or we can complain about our sore feet.  
Whichever we choose, we still gotta do the hike.  
I decided a long time ago, singing made a lot more sense.

– Author Unknown

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## Chapter 1: The Research Problem

### Background Statement

Humour is used widely by instructors in North American college classrooms as, "...a catalyst for classroom magic" (Kher, Molstad & Donahue, 1999, p.1). For over 40 years, instructors' use of pedagogical humour has been positively correlated with increases in student academic achievement and enjoyment (Garner, 2006; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Warnock, 1989; Ziv, 1988). Historically, though, the use of humour in traditional higher education has been discouraged (Feldman, 1976), with professors believing either their role as a scholar, or the content they were teaching, was far too serious to be presented lightly (Bryant, Comisky & Zillmann, 1979). In recent years, however, there has been an attitude shift. Recent studies concerning the preferences of college students conclude that instructor humour, when used appropriately, is a highly desirable teaching trait in higher education classrooms (Bain, 2011; Berk, 1996; Decker 2007; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999).

Garner's 2006 declaration that, "ha-ha can lead to aha!" (p.177), is supported across much of the current literature pertaining to humour in higher education. The acknowledgement that humour, shared between teachers and students, enhances student learning due to the creation of comfortable, relaxed learning climates has now become the prevailing sentiment among many current educational researchers (Martin, 2001; McMorris, Kim & Li, 2001; Robinson & Kakela, 2006; Torok, McMorris & Lin, 2004; Weimer, 2009).

The existing body of research pertaining to humour in higher education is dominated by studies examining its benefits to student learning and enjoyment, and establishes a robust association between a teacher's use of humour, and improved student outcomes (Check, 1997; Machlev & Karlin, 2016; Powell & Andresen, 1985; Torok et al., 2004; Zillmann, 1977). Far less is known, however, about how or why instructors use humour in their teaching, and its effects on student-teacher immediacy, and perceived teacher-efficacy.

### **Problem Statement and Context**

Although research has established that using a humorous pedagogical approach in teaching strongly contributes to student learning (Weimer, 2009), actually knowing how or when to incorporate humour into the practice of teaching is a problem for many college educators. Many college teachers are reticent to use a humorous approach for fear of being regarded by students as unfunny and incompetent (Zillmann, 1983), or, clownish, rather than amusing (Powell & Andresen 1985). There are claims that many college instructors avoid using humour, either due to a perceived deficit in the area of theatrical performance, (Miller, 1979), or, for a lack of humorous teaching tools in their pedagogical repertoire (Huss & Eastep, 2016).

The existing studies on humour in higher education present perspectives and benefits almost exclusively from the point of view of the student. This study examined humour and its use from the instructors' points of view; an assessment angle chronically under-researched in the current literature. Additionally, although there are 24 publicly funded colleges in Ontario, Canada, with thousands of enrolments, and hundreds of teachers (Colleges Ontario, 2018), little of the existing research has been generated by Canadian researchers. The Canadian perspective on humour in higher education is, therefore, largely unknown. As instructor-humour is considered both an essential social skill (Martin, 2007), and an increasingly desired teacher trait (Berk, 1998; Decker, 2007) in North America, this researcher felt that its emergence as an area of scholarly investigation (Bryant et al., 1979; Garner 2006; Torok et al., 2004; Warner, 1989), underscored the validity of this study.

Although Lewis (2010) claimed that laughter has become integral to critical pedagogy, the topic has been "strangely neglected in both the research literature of higher education, and in works which deal with techniques of teaching" (Powell & Andersen, 1985). Given the deficit of Canadian literature pertaining to the phenomenon of humour in pedagogy, this study's

exploration of humour from the perspective of instructors at a single Canadian college, hopes to constitute a valuable, uniquely Canadian contribution to the wider body of research.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to understand how and why college instructors intentionally use humour in their classrooms, and to explore their perceptions of its effects on their student-teacher relationships, and perceived levels of teacher-efficacy. The study took place at a large college in southwestern Ontario, hereafter called Aspen College (pseudonym).

### **Research Questions**

This study attempted to answer the main research question, “How do college instructors intentionally use humour to create student-teacher immediacy, and how do they perceive this impacts their effectiveness as teachers?” Several sub-questions operationalized the study:

1. What benefits do college instructors perceive in using humorous pedagogical tools in college classrooms?
2. How do college instructors use humour to create higher levels of student-teacher immediacy?
3. In what ways does using humour in teaching affect college instructors’ teaching enjoyment?
4. How do college instructors who use humour in their teaching practices, perceive the quality of their teaching?

### **Significance of Study**

This study was significant, as it added to the limited body of knowledge on humour in the college classroom from the under-examined perspective of Canadian college instructors.

Considering the paucity of Canadian research in this area, this study not only contributed data to



the extant body of literature, it identified specific humorous pedagogical strategies that could be used by college instructors to either ameliorate, or enhance, student-teacher relationships, classroom climate, and overall teacher effectiveness. The conclusions and insights from this study are significant and useful for instructors, researchers, or administrators, who wish to better understand the applicability of humour as a pedagogical teaching tool in higher education.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following is a list of operational definitions and terms as they were used for the purpose of this research study:

***Humour:*** “...anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny, and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it” (Martin, 2007, p.5).

***Illustrative Teaching Style:*** A specific style of teaching related to instructor enthusiasm. Often referred to in relation to student-teacher immediacy, an illustrative teaching style uses gestures, vocal intonation, eye contact, liveliness, story-telling, and humor to explain and communicate course curricula (Babad, 2007).

***Implicit Communication Theory:*** Attributed to Mehrabian (1971, 1981), communication pertaining to “feelings and attitudes above and beyond the content conveyed by speech” (Mehrabian, 1981, p.2), also, the transmission of subtle information about “feelings, like-dislike, or attitude” (Mehrabian, 1981, p.3), through predominantly nonverbal channels.

***Pedagogy:*** “The method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018).

***Perceived Teacher Efficacy:*** Refers to “the extent to which a teacher believes they have the capacity to affect student performance” (Ashton, 1984, p. 28). The term is also referred to as teacher effectiveness.

***Student-Teacher Immediacy:*** The positive qualities of the relationship dynamic between a student and a teacher, usually achieved by decreasing physical and/or psychological distance between student and teacher (Gorham & Zakahi, 1990). Also, the term can refer to a student's perception of a specific teacher's approachability, or unapproachability (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The terms student-teacher immediacy, intimacy, and student-teacher relationships, are used interchangeably.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

#### **Scope.**

Surveying instructors from a single Ontario college limited the generalizability of the data. As participation in the study was voluntary, the data for analysis may have skewed to reflect responses from instructors with high, pre-existing levels of perceived teacher-efficacy, or intimate student-teacher relationships. In addition, the responses from the instructor population sample surveyed may have also limited the validity of the data through influence by social desirability report bias.

A number of intervening variables may have also compromised the validity of the research: (1) an instructors' perception of what constituted appropriate classroom humour may not have aligned with current (popular) scholarly opinion, (2) a teacher's self-perception of his/her sense of humour, or the way they intentionally use humour in their teaching, may not have truly aligned with the criteria for inclusion in this study, (3) years of full-time teaching experience possessed by an instructor may influence his/her perceptions of personal teaching-efficacy, and, (4) the subject matter an instructor teaches, and/or the form in which it is taught (face-to-face, online, lecture, seminar, lab), may impact how instructors perceived the potential for student-teacher immediacy, and, subsequently, each instructor's self-perception around his/her effectiveness as a teacher; elements over which the researcher has no control.

**Delimitations.**

This study was delimited to experienced, full-time faculty within the Faculty of Health Sciences, Community Studies and Public Safety at a single Ontario college, who admitted to consciously operationalizing a humorous pedagogical approach through either, (a) active employment of a generally humorous teaching disposition, or, (b) regular use of specific humorous pedagogical tools in their practice of teaching, or both. Aside from the use of humour, in-depth examination of other explicit and implicit student-teacher interactions (e.g., eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, touch, or vocal intonations), and their influence on immediacy were delimited in this study. Finally, as this study highlighted only the instructors' perceptions of pedagogical humour on student-teacher immediacy, the study was delimited to just one side of student-teacher immediacy phenomenon.

**Overview of the Literature and Theoretical Constructs**

A review of the literature revealed that relatively little is known about the ways in which teachers use humour in the college classroom. Exploration of contemporary educational research suggested student learning and enjoyment is largely influenced by a teacher's ability to create an emotionally warm, affable learning environment, through the use of specific communication and teaching tools (Ashton 1984; Bryant et al., 1979; Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun & Sutton, 2009; Mehrabian, 1971, 1981; Powell & Andresen, 1985; Tews, Jackson, Ramsey & Michel, 2015), and much of the reviewed literature indicated that students thrive physically, psychologically, socially, emotionally, and academically, in the classrooms of college educators who employ appropriate humour as a teaching strategy (Bain, 2011; Berk 1996, 1988; Chabeli, 2008; Check, 1997; Decker, 2007; Garner, 2006; Kher et al., 1999; Martin, 2001; Vance, 1987; Ziv, 1988). With students investing so much of their time interacting with instructors in college classrooms, the importance of identifying the effects of a humorous pedagogy on student-teacher

relationships, classroom climate, and a teacher's perception of his/her ability to teach, has become an area of significant interest to researchers, and to this researcher as well.

The literature revealed no singular theory to support the use of humour as an effective pedagogical tool. Mehrabian's (1981) implicit communication theory anchored much of the extent literature concerning the ways in which classroom culture and climate in higher education are created. Mehrabian (1981) claimed that the silent messages conveyed between communicator and referent that exist beyond speech, including facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, touch, or spatial proximity, can convey information far more effectively than the more explicit modalities of communication, like writing, or speaking. As much of the literature alluded to the powerful influence of implicit messaging in humour, and its relationship to increasing student-teacher immediacy, Mehrabian's (1971, 1981) implicit communication theory was foundational to this study.

Astin's involvement theory (1984) was also heavily mentioned in the literature pertaining to humour and student-teacher immediacy. The theory suggests that any teacher consciously involving students in any aspect of their academic experience, is providing that student a rich opportunity in which to invest physical and psychological energy. Although Astin (1984) did not name humour, specifically, as a tool of involvement, given the social, shared nature of laughter, many researchers referred to humour as an ideal involvement tool (Garner, 2006; Powell & Andresen 1985; Robinson & Kakela, 2006). On the topic of laughter in the classroom, Astin's (1984) foundational framework provides a platform on which much of the current research on humour in higher education, and its relation to teacher-efficacy, has been based. "The sheer amount of interaction between the individual student and the faculty has widespread effects on student development...(and) student-faculty interaction has its strongest positive correlations with satisfaction with faculty" (Astin, 1993, p.11).

A review of the relevant, salient literature affirmed unequivocally that college instructors who skillfully included humour in their teaching practice were of great value to the field of higher education. Berk (1998) asserts that the physical act of laughing not only served to relax an individual mentally, it also exercised the chest muscles, improved respiration, lowered blood pressure, delivered greater amounts of oxygen to the blood, and released endorphins, thereby creating an ideal setting for learning. Additionally, the reviewed literature provided an emerging picture of humour as an indispensable pedagogical tool for fostering rich student-teacher relationships, (Babad, 2007; Chabeli, Malesela, & Rasepae, 2014; Dalonges & Fried, 2016; Mulder, 2012; Velez & Cano, 2008), a factor that can play a significant influence on a teacher's perception of his/her effectiveness as a teacher (Christophel, 1990; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Civikly, 1986; Duckworth, Quinn & Seligman 2009).

### **Overview of Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to understand how and why Canadian college instructors intentionally use humour in their classrooms, and to explore their perceptions of its effects on their student-teacher relationships, and perceived levels of teacher-efficacy. The study took place at a large community college in southwestern Ontario.

As the aim of this qualitative study was to examine the subjective experience of individual instructors within the Faculty of Health Sciences, Community Studies and Public Safety at the study college, personal interviews were conducted in order to gather data, in an attempt to understand their lived experiences. The interviews consisted of relevant, open-ended questions, designed to answer the main research question, and its sub-questions. Additionally, the researcher used a self-assessment tool on humour orientation (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991) as an inductive tool with which to triangulate data. As this was a qualitative, phenomenological study, the researcher acted as the primary instrument for gathering, and

interpreting, any and all data related to the study. Study participants were experienced, full-time faculty from across programs within the Faculty of Health Sciences, Community Studies and Public Safety at the study college.

As a characteristic of qualitative research is an emergent design (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016), the researcher expected that data collected early in the investigation would, “influence the kind of data the researcher subsequently gathers” (p. 259). It was hoped that information generated through the interviews and the questionnaire would identify patterns and themes in humorous instructor teaching behaviours. This researcher used the Humor Orientation Scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991) to triangulate consistencies, or inconsistencies, in the humorous strategies used by the instructors. The study also revealed specific pedagogical practices that can be adopted by other educators to either ameliorate, or enhance, teaching-learning paradigms. Considerations around data availability, collection, and interpretation were incorporated into the structure and timing of this research. Data were gathered in the 2018 academic year, and were appropriately coded and anonymized using a sound, qualitative approach.

### **Overview of the Study**

The exploration of how and why college instructors intentionally use humour in their teaching, how these practices were perceived to foster greater student-teacher immediacy, and what influence they have on an instructor’s perception of his/her teacher-efficacy, revealed numerous important pedagogical strategies that, when employed effectively and intentionally, could maximize student-teacher relationships, and, perceived teaching effectiveness. This study allowed a better understanding of the phenomenon of humorous pedagogy in higher education to emerge from the instructor’s point of view, and permitted greater insight into why teachers

employ such strategies, and how they influence student-teacher immediacy, and perceived teaching-efficacy.

The researcher felt that if educational researchers, practitioners and administrators were to have a better understanding of the positive effects of humour in the college classroom, then both Mehrabian's (1971, 1981) implicit communication theory, and Astin's (1984) theory of involvement would have found concrete ways to manifest in current pedagogical practice. Conclusions resulting from the study could be shared across college programs, with a view to increasing the quality of humorous pedagogical interventions aimed at promoting closer student-teacher relationships, thereby increasing college instructors' perceptions of their overall teaching effectiveness.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

### Introduction

As a topic of scholarly research, humour is not a new concept. The relationship between humour and teaching can be traced back as far as Plato. As one of humour's most influential critics, Plato objected strongly to it, considering humour an unruly emotion that threatened to override self-control (Morreall, 2016). As an applied pedagogical tool in higher education, humour is a relatively new area of inquiry (Ziv, 1988), but has, in the last 20 years, become a topic of increasing scholarly interest. Although abundant, studies examining the impact of teacher-humour have largely failed to produce sufficient empirical evidence to support its use in the college classroom, despite much anecdotal evidence to support its use. Author E.B. White, claims that humour cannot, or should not, be explained. "Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process, and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind" (White, n.d.). According to researchers Huss and Eastep (2016), investigations by researchers into humour as a viable pedagogical approach, appear to be on the rise at almost every educational level, and in almost every educational discipline. Thus, the teachers' use of humour, specifically in higher education, is emerging as an area worthy of scholarly investigation.

Berk (1996, 1998) believes it is important for college instructors to establish a fine balance between the playful and the serious. Reflecting on Berk's work as a professor of biostatistics and measurement at Johns Hopkins University, Decker (2007) writes, "(Berk)... puts cautions, warnings, and information taglines on his course handouts: 'for topical use only,' 'action figures sold separately,' 'may cause drowsiness'" (p. 9). In defense of combining humour with serious curricular content, Berk (1998) states, "It is physically impossible to laugh and snore at the same time" (p.10). Lewis (2010) poses a similar defense of humour in the classroom: "...the critically transformative laugh...is an aesthetic rupture that redistributes the



sensible of the classroom, fracturing the power relations between the teacher as master and the student as passive pupil as well as the dulling rituals of standardization” (p. 641).

Much of the literature pertaining to instructors’ use of humour in higher education revolves around the premise that students benefit both socially, and academically, when they are immersed in a fun, enjoyable, learning environment (Berk, 1998; Garner, 2005, 2006; Powell & Andresen, 1985; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Vance 1987). The message of “how ha-ha can lead to aha!” (Garner, 2006, p.177) is persistent in research across six decades, emerging in studies as far back as 1959 (Cosner), and into every decade that has followed, including the foundational studies of the 1970s (Bryant, Comisky & Zillmann, 1979; Zillmann, 1977), 1980s (Powell & Andresen, 1985; Warnock, 1989; Ziv, 1988), 1990s (Berk, 1996, 1998; Check, 1997; Pollack & Freda, 1997), and the 2000s (Chabeli, 2008, Chabeli, Malesela, & Rasepae, 2014; Decker, 2007; Huss & Eastep, 2016; Tews, Jackson, Ramsay & Michel, 2015; Wanzer, Frymier & Irwin, 2010). Regardless of the era in which it was conducted, each of these studies reached fairly similar conclusions: Students learn more, acquire stronger skills, and have more enjoyable learning experiences in the classrooms of college teachers who possess a sense of humour, and employ fun into their practice of teaching in higher education.

The word “humour” itself is troublesome and complex, as its definition relies on context, interpretation, timing, culture, and humour type. Therefore, the following section will begin by defining humour for our purposes. The rest of the literature review is organized around several themes: (a) student perceptions of humour in the classroom, (b) the specific effects of humour in the college classroom, (c) humour and student teacher immediacy, (d) the theoretical framework, (e) The operationalization of humour: Theory to practice, and, finally, (f) humour and perceived teacher efficacy.

### **Defining Humour**

Merriam-Webster (2018) defines humour as: (a) that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous, (b) the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous, (c) something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Martin (2007) defines humor somewhat differently: "...anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it" (p. 5). Whether in the form of an off-hand remark, a cartoon, a facial expression, a pun, a joke, sarcasm, slapstick, or teasing, each form of humour, and its interpretation by those involved in the exchange, becomes a challenge to identify or isolate academically, largely due to its perceptive subjectivity.

### **Student Perceptions of Humour in the Classroom**

An early study by Feldman (1976) condensing a large body of research on the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of a superior teacher, made no mention of humour in its findings. In fact, his comprehensive synthesis of 49 behavioural and attitudinal teacher studies, conducted between 1940-1975, reported that it was intelligence, subject matter knowledge, and organizational ability that made a professor superior, not comedic ability. Feldman (1976) cautions against the use of levity, stating, "The teacher may be interesting and stimulating for presumably wrong or inauthentic reasons, for example, reasons of showmanship...and wit at the expense of substance and meaning" (p. 266). Data generated in the years following Feldman's (1976) study strongly suggests otherwise. More recent literature suggests those instructors who use humour in teaching, are generally regarded more favourably by college students than those who do not (Bain, 2011; Berk 1996; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). In a study on student perceptions of humour, published just three years after Feldman's (1976), Bryant et al. (1979), argued heavily in favour of its use. The study also acknowledged that, historically, humour has

had a poor reputation, and has traditionally had no place in higher education. It was noted that the traditionally humourless higher education classroom resulted from professors believing that employing humour was either below their scholarly station, or that the curriculum was too serious to be either taken, or presented, lightly (Bryant, et al., 1979).

Data gathered from student surveys over the last 40 years reliably identifies humour, and a teacher's possession of a sense of humour, as essential to teacher effectiveness, and is therefore a desirable teacher characteristic (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillmann, 1980; Huss & Eastep, 2016; Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, Collins, Filer, Wiedmaier & Moore, 2007; Pollack & Freda, 1997). In the data collected and synthesized from decades of student feedback surveys, students consistently report that the presence of humour in the college classroom is important to them, as it increases their enjoyment of the overall educational experience (Bain, 2004, 2011; Berk, 1996, 1998; Bryant et al., 1980; Check, 1997; Civikly, 1986; Decker, 2007; Garner, 2005, 2006; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Tews et al., 2015; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Ziv, 1976, 1988).

Student survey results notwithstanding, many of the research studies examined for this literature review argue that, in addition to increasing overall student enjoyment, there are other benefits to students when humour is in the college classroom, as well. A correlative relationship between humour, enhanced student learning, and mental wellbeing was confirmed by Ziv (1976, 1988), Gorham and Christophel (1990), Wanzer and Frymier (1999), Garner (2005), and Bain (2004, 2011). The studies conclude that a relaxed, jovial teaching environment not only boosted student tests results, but increased student information retention levels, and overall student success.

Given that 93% of students, at all educational levels, view humour as an essential ingredient in teaching (Check, 1986), one might think that social scientists and educators would have taken a keen interest in studying its effects. This, however, is not the case. A study by

Powell and Andresen (1985) declared that, given the sheer popularity of humour as a desired teacher trait, humour should therefore be a topic of clear academic interest, “yet it has been strangely neglected in both the research literature of higher education, and in works which deal with the techniques of teaching” (p.79). This researcher’s examination of the extent literature concurs with Powell and Andresen’s (1985) findings. There is scant literature on the topic of humour in higher education, especially pertaining to Canadian pedagogical practice. Aside from the mention of humour in two Canadian studies examining student opinion around effective instructor attributes, (Delaney, Johnson, Johnson & Treslan, 2010; Ralph 2003), very little Canadian literature exists on the topics of humour in teaching, and/or higher education, student-teacher immediacy, or teacher efficacy; this researcher’s areas of interest.

Still, given the myriad characteristic similarities common to Canadian and American students in higher education, it is important to acknowledge the applicability and generalization of the (predominantly) American studies examined in this literature review. The general sentiment of every article and study examined by this writer, post-Feldman (1976), strongly indicates that students benefit when instructors incorporate humour into their teaching practices. Lewis (2010) summarizes years of studies on humour and learning, citing the positive physiological and psychological effects experienced by students resulting from the presence of laughter in the classroom thusly:

Laughter...reconnects the disconnected teacher and student, and recomposes the perceptual organization of spaces marked for study, versus play. Laughing is a return of the body into education, of the excess of voice, and of the immediacy of affect that are drained off by the immunizing power of standardization (Lewis, 2010, p. 642).

### **Specific Effects of Humour in the Classroom**

Humour is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as, “that quality of action, speech or writing which excites amusement; oddity, jocularly, facetiousness, comicality, fun” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). A foundational study by Bryant et al. (1979) on the frequency, occurrence, and types of humour used by teachers in college settings, classified teacher-humour into six fundamental typologies, or units. Each humorous unit was classified according to the manner in which it was presented: (1) jokes, (2) riddles, (3) puns, (4) funny stories, (5) humorous comments, and, (6) other - any type of humour that failed to fall into the other five categories. Citing Freud’s influential work that labeled humour as either tendentious (hostile, sexual, or hostile *and* sexual), or harmless nonsense (Bryant et al., 1979, p.116), the researchers explain that humour, either planned or spontaneous, must have a disparagement target: self, student, or other. Whether funny stories related to content, offhanded comments, unplanned humour, or the use of funny props, what is considered funny or humorous, appears to be, “a whole composite of different behaviours, rather than one single one, and any attempt to explain them equally would appear to be doomed to do so” (Davis & Farina, 1970, p.175).

Humour has been associated in much of the literature with positive physiological and psychological effects (Berk, 1998; Garner, 2005, 2006; Lei, Cohen & Russler, 2010; Martin, 2001, 2007; Pollak & Freda, 1997; Ziv, 1988), and these effects are not limited only to the college classroom. In their study of humour as it relates to student learning, Gorham and Christophel (1990) determined a correlative relationship between teacher-humour, and “student perceptions of cognitive learning at the college level” (p.46). Christophel (1990), and Christophel and Gorham (1995), relate the use of humour overwhelmingly to positive student outcomes. The literature consistently reports that humour appears to be good for everyone, both teachers *and* students, provided that its form or type is appropriate, and that the people involved in the humorous moment, or situation, feel comfortable with it.

**Physiological Effects.**

Martin's (2001) research study on humour, laughter, and physical health critically reviewed much of the existing published, empirical research on the subject, focusing on the effects of humour and laughter on the immune system, pain tolerance, blood pressure, longevity, and illness symptoms. Interestingly, Martin (2001) concluded, "despite the popularity of opinion that humour and laughter have significant health benefits, the general empirical evidence is generally weak and inconclusive" (p. 516). Check's (1997) study on the impact of humour in the classroom concluded that laughter stimulates the cerebral cortex of the brain, and therefore has the capacity to enhance a student's overall health by alleviating both physical pain and psychological discomfort.

Check (1997), McMorris, Kim and Li (2001), and Lei et al., (2010) ascribe numerous benefits to the physical act of laughing, specifically citing the movement of the diaphragm during hearty laughter massages the right side of the heart, and triggers the release of endorphins, "a natural pain killer" (Lei et al., p.327). Berk (1998) declares that the very physical act of laughing creates an ideal setting for learning. He argues that, as laughter has been proven to exercise the chest muscles, improve respiration and circulation, lower blood pressure, deliver greater amounts of oxygen to the blood, and release endorphins, humour should, therefore, be incorporated into tests and exams whenever possible (Berk, 1998). Berk (1998) also cites Cousins (1991), who strongly touted the healing effects of laughter in relieving tension and anxiety, and increasing mental sharpness – "all desirable things in pedagogical settings" (p. 177).

**Psychological Effects.**

On the subject of psychological benefits of humour in adult education, researcher Warner (1989) advised that, when instructors share a laugh with students in class, they should expect a release of tension, an increase in student creativity, a deepening of the student-teacher bond,

relief from boredom, and an increase of student enjoyment (Warner, 1989). Later research supports Warner's claims. "Humour is a social skill that helps a student cope with stress, enhance his or her sense of well-being, alleviate unhappiness, depression and anxiety, and boost self-image" (Pollak & Freda, 1997, p.176). This is echoed by Berk (1998), who claims that the effects of humour and laughter, in addition to reducing stress and anxiety, enhances students' self-esteem, and increases their levels of self-motivation. Back in 1979, Bryant et al. concluded that research evidence regarding the effects of humour on learning was, at best, unreliable and inconsistent. This is contrary to the research of Ziv (1988) that followed, who, after conducting a groundbreaking, longitudinal investigation into the relationship of student outcomes and instructor humour in higher education, found that an instructor's use of content-relevant humour successfully facilitated and enhanced student learning, and resulted in higher mean test scores than those in the control group.

Lei et al., (2010) claim that humour is a significant psychological tool that, when used skillfully by teachers, can help students cope with stress, boost self-esteem, heighten levels of self-worth, and alleviate symptoms of test anxiety and depression. These findings are echoes of earlier studies examining teacher affinity-seeking behaviours by Frymier and Thomson (1992), and Berk (1998). Torok, McMorris and Lin's (2004) more recent research agrees with these findings, and asserts that enjoyment for all is fostered when an instructor creates a relaxed, playful, engaged and safe atmosphere, "instead of hiding behind tortoise-shell glasses" (p.19).

Studies over the last four decades have found that when students are immersed in humorous learning environments, their attention increases due to their perception of a less intimidating, more positive learning atmosphere (Bryant & Zillman, 1988; Bryant et al., 1980; Garner, 2005). The findings argue that students are more likely to not only engage in critical thinking processes, they are also better equipped to actively contribute to a more social,

collaborative learning environment due to a lowering of their individual and group defenses (Garner, 2006; Glenn, 2002).

In addition to survival, belonging, power, and freedom, Glasser (1986), includes fun among the five primary needs of human beings. Although Glasser (1986) admits fun, as an educational concept, is difficult to define, he strongly associates it with laughter and entertainment - characteristics he feels both good comedians, and good teachers, share. Not all researchers share Glasser's (1986) opinion, however. Another view is that fun and humour in college classroom should be used carefully, and judiciously. Atherton (2002) states, "Entertainment in teaching should be an epiphenomenon – a spin off from the achievement of learning, not a route to it" (p.5). Bain (2004) generally supports the idea of humour in education, stating, "...no one achieves great teaching with only vigorous vocal tones, a powerful microphone, good posture, strong eye contact, and honourable intentions" (p. B7), but reminds us that scholarly pursuits should be primarily focused on learning, and not the antics of the professor: "Great teachers...focus on the nature and process of learning, rather than the performance of the instructor" (Bain, 2004, p. B7). Such warnings are rife throughout the literature, and are an important counterpoint to the larger, over-arching sentiment shared by so many of the researchers, who tend to lean strongly toward supporting the inclusion of humour in faculty's pedagogical strategies (Huss & Eastep, 2016).

#### **Humour: Proceed with Caution.**

Willibald (1998) found that studies of humour in higher educational settings have not sufficiently analyzed the idea that humour is interpreted differently from person to person, and that what one individual might consider funny or amusing, might be easily be deemed offensive or insulting by another (Willibald, 1998). Numerous researchers in the literature acknowledge the potentially damaging effects of negative, or hostile humour, explaining that what may be



intended as harmless or inoffensive may be construed differently, depending on circumstance and individual (Bryant et al., 1980; Huss & Eastep, 2016; Powell & Andresen, 1985). “As with any sense...such as taste or smell, individuals may have differing levels of receptivity; similarly, humour can be highly personal, contextual, and subjective” (Garner, 2005, p.1).

Chabeli (2008) argued that there are essentially two types of humour: appropriate and inappropriate. “Any humour intended to divide people, belittle or ridicule, discriminate, encourage negativity, or be at another person’s expense, is inappropriate” (Chabeli, 2008, p. 57). Other researchers report that a student who becomes the target of dark, aggressive, or negative humour (sarcasm, degrading comments, ethnically or sexually precarious, or depreciatory humour), can undermine the effectiveness and credibility of the delivering professor, and can wound student self-perception (Chabeli, 2008, Chabeli et al., 2014; Torok, et al., 2004). These conclusions are supported in the findings of a large, open-ended study on the appropriate and inappropriate uses of humour (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006), which cautions teachers using any type of degrading humour, aimed at disparaging a student, must be discouraged at all costs.

The literature reveals that while the occurrence of teacher humour in college classrooms may be common, it can also be controversial. In his longitudinal study of humour in pedagogical practice, Dickmeyer (1993) provides a thorough discussion of the negative effects of humour, and names specific humour types that should be avoided in college classrooms. Among these, Dickmeyer (1993) labels sick or distasteful humour, ridicule of an individual or group’s culture or heritage, cynicism, sexual humour, or, any humour considered prejudicial, as “dangerous” (1993, p.7).

Warner’s (1989) earlier study on humour as a didactic tool in higher education, stressed the importance of both good timing, and propriety, in the use of humour with adult students.

Zillmann (1983) reports that teachers who fail to draw linkages between humour, and the course curriculum, may be regarded by the students as not only unfunny, but incompetent. Powell and Andresen (1985) concur, and warn that when teachers misuse humour, they run the risk of appearing clownish, rather than amusing. “An excess of humour can serve to undermine the credibility of a speaker, and lead him or her to being perceived as a frustrated comedian” (Powell & Andresen, p.84). Finally, a more recent study by Torok et al. (2004), warns that if the principle goal of college instructors is to facilitate and maximize student learning, then humour could be deemed an unnecessary source of distraction, and a threat to classroom teaching efficiency.

### **Humour and Student-Teacher Immediacy**

Social psychologist Mehrabian (1971) is recognized for coining and defining the concept of immediacy, a phenomenon that can be explained as people being, “drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, or prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer” (Mehrabian, 1971, p.1). Furthering the work of Mehrabian’s “Silent Messages” (1971, 1981), Gorham and Christophel (1990) specified a set of low-inference behaviours which contribute to student-teacher immediacy, including vocal expressiveness, body posture, smiling, gesturing, moving around while teaching, maintaining eye contact, giving praise, indicating a willingness to engage in conversations outside of class, and the use of humour. The term “teacher immediacy” is heavily referenced in more recent literature (Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009; Goetz, Lüdtke, Nett, Keller & Lipnevich, 2013; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Patrick, Hisley, Kempler & College, 2000; Velez & Cano, 2008), and refers largely to the quality of the student-teacher relationship dynamic. Immediacy also considers a student’s perception of a specific teacher’s approachability, or unapproachability (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Immediacy can be best understood as the resulting impact of

student and teacher behavioural interactions, both verbal and nonverbal, and how those interactions influence the perception of closeness that the teacher and student, notice in relationship to one another.

The suggestion that humorous exchanges can create more meaningful, positive student-teacher relationships is echoed in the research across decades, (Albert, 2010; Christophel, 1990; Cross, 1999; Frenzel et al., 2009; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Von Culin, et al., 2014; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Lewis (2010) states, "...laughter is transformative and revolutionary...to laugh with the people (rather than at them) is to engage in a transformation of the relationship between self and other" (p. 640). In a continuation of Mehrabian's foundational work (1966, 1967, 1971, 1981), Gorham and Christophel (1990) discovered that when their study subjects, who were teachers, self-reported high numbers of humorous incidents in their teaching, this correlated positively with the frequency of the teachers' use of other verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviours, as well. Additionally, Gorham and Christophel's (1990) data suggests that the way a student perceives his/her instructor's humour in the classroom, is influenced by that instructor's use of other "pro-social" immediacy behaviours as well, including eye contact, touch, and the offering of praise (Gorham & Christophel, 1990).

An early study by Cosner (1959), stated, "laughter and humour are like an invitation...to start a conversation: they aim to decrease social distance" (p.172). Almost 50 years later, Chabeli's (2008) findings aligned with those of Cosner (1959). In her study conducted on the perceptions of nursing teachers' use of humour to promote learning in nursing students, Chabeli's (2008) study participants unanimously indicated that humour, if used positively, unquestionably promoted student learning. Chabeli explains, "The more laughing, the smaller the distance between the learners and the teacher. The teacher who infuses humour into a presentation appears more approachable and appealing to learners" (2008, p.54).

The application of immediacy principles in pedagogical practice encompasses a variety of verbal and nonverbal communication techniques, the goal of which is to establish or enhance relationships between people, and to build trust and confidence between those engaged in the communication exchange (Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Depending on its nature, mode of transmission, or code (Bryant et al., 1979), humour, as a phenomenon, can fall into either the verbal or nonverbal operational categories. The creation of understanding occurs through verbal and nonverbal communication channels, and is reciprocal between student and teacher. Immediacy can increase, or decrease, as a result of either excellent or poor communication between the communicator and the referent, so it is incumbent on both to have mutual, consensual agreement on the interpretation of the vocalization, gesture, or facial expression being transmitted (Mehrabian, 1966).

#### **Verbal immediacy behaviours.**

The term “verbal immediacy” refers to the strategic employment of certain verbal stylistic choices, such vocal pitch, timbre, and expression, volume, modulation, articulation, fluency, and the use of effective pauses, when in a verbal exchange with another person intended to decrease perceived distance (Dalonges & Fried, 2016). Other verbal behaviours considered conducive to increased immediacy include self-disclosure, storytelling, and humour (Dalonges & Fried, 2016). In terms of the student-teacher dynamics, Velez and Cano (2008) explain that verbal immediacy is most often expressed “through the use of praise for student efforts, humour, self-disclosure, willingness to engage students in conversation, and overall openness” (p.78).

Mehrabian (1966) hypothesized that the degree of immediacy in the linguistic expression of a particular communicator-referent relationship is positively correlated with the communicator's degree, “of positive affective, evaluative, and/or preferential experiences of the referent” (p.28). Other researchers agree that the use of carefully crafted verbalizations,

specifically humorous ones, have the power to alleviate stress, release tension, boost self-esteem, and relieve the symptoms of depression (Lei et al., 2010; Torok, McMorris & Lin, 2004; Bryant et al., 1979). Patrick et al., (2000) highlights the importance of teachers including excitement and enthusiasm in their verbal exchanges with students, concluding that the students of teachers who use dynamic, energized speaking techniques in their teaching enjoyed students with higher levels of intrinsic academic motivation than those who did not. More recently, Lei et al., (2010), added that college instructors who use appropriate verbal humour have been shown to increase student interest, attention, motivation, and even comprehension of course content.

### **Nonverbal immediacy behaviours**

In addition to his research in the arena of linguistic immediacy, Mehrabian (1966, 1971, 1981) conducted a number of pioneering research studies examining nonverbal immediacy behaviours as well, and the ways in which these behaviours transmit feelings and attitudes. Described by Velez and Cano (2008) as a “largely relational language perceived to convey affective feelings of warmth, closeness and belonging” (p. 77), nonverbal immediacy was described by Andersen (1979) as an implicit use of any closeness-inducing behaviours and cues that promote feelings of pleasure or arousal. Andersen’s (1979) foundational study on immediacy and teacher effectiveness concluded that teacher immediacy could be operationalized through a number of distinct, nonverbal behaviours, cited by Velez and Cano (2008) specifically as “eye contact, body position, physical proximity, personal touch and body movement” (p.77). Gorham and Zakahi (1990) declared that college instructors using nonverbal cues and gestures, with a view to decreasing physical or psychological distance between sender and receiver, are practicing immediacy behaviours. They point out that these behaviours are of even greater consequence if practiced with the more specific goal of building positive student-teacher relationships.

Christophel (1990) suggests that students who are taught by enthusiastic teachers experience greater student-teacher immediacy levels than those who are not. Frenzel et al. (2009) explains that positive student-teacher interactions occur through a subtle phenomenon known as emotional transmission. Frenzel et al. (2009) suggest, “a teacher’s emotional experience during teaching should translate into the degree of enthusiasm expressed in teaching style, which in turn should influence students’ experiences of enjoyment while being instructed” (p.706). Frenzel et al. (2009) conclude that pleasant emotions and sensations, such as amusement, laughter, or smiling, can have a profoundly positive impact on student resiliency, academic self-efficacy, and personal motivation (Frenzel et al., 2009).

Findings from numerous studies (Babad, 2007; Cleveland-Innes & Emes, 2005; Frenzel et al, 2009) suggest that an instructor’s emotional state is expressed in the classroom through predominantly nonverbal channels, and can have a contagion-like influence on their learners’ own emotional states. This is supported in the research of Patrick, et al., (2000), and Velez and Cano (2008). Other researchers found that teachers who aim to create positive, emotionally immediate learning climates unwittingly transmit this goodwill to their students, thereby encouraging greater student independence, and facilitating greater student success (Albert 2010; Astin 1984, 1985; Cross, 1999; Hoy, 2000; Hoy et al., 2012). In a study on positive predictors of teacher effectiveness, Duckworth, Quinn and Seligman (2009) hypothesized that a causal pathway may link a teacher’s life satisfaction to superior teaching performance due to the instructor’s transmission of zest and enthusiasm, and that students will be drawn to teachers, “whose energy and positive attitude can shift the set-point of mood for the entire classroom” (p. 541).

Studies pertaining to student involvement (Astin, 1984, 1985, 1993; Brooks & Goldstein, 2008; Frenzel et al., 2009; Hoy et al., 2012; Schaller & DeWine, 1993), have proved that

instructors' experience of enjoyment within the classroom translates into enthusiasm during teaching, and the teachers' expressions of enjoyment, such as smiling, widened eyes, and laughter, are behaviours associated with an enthusiastic, illustrative teaching style (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Patrick et al., 2000, as cited in Frenzel et al., 2009). These studies evidence the importance of establishing a relaxed learning environment as essential to engaging students in their learning.

Although the nonverbal phenomenon of teacher immediacy might appear outwardly to be little more than unbridled pedagogic enthusiasm, or well-honed interpersonal communication skills, (Babad, 2007), research over the last four decades (Andersen, 1979; Babad, 2007; Bain, 2004, 2011; Frenzel, et al., 2009; Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990; Velez & Cano, 2008), argues that the closeness students perceive between themselves and their teachers is critically important, as these perceptions have strong ties to student motivation, learning, and achievement.

The literature strongly suggests that college instructors, who regard high-immediacy relationships with their students as intrinsic to student wellbeing, transmit this desire through their verbal and nonverbal interactions with those students. This in turn, has a positive impact on student development, and can influence a student's willingness, and capacity, to learn (Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990). Other researchers argue that teachers, who take care to nurture their students' emotional and social health, are nurturing an important component of the learning process (Astin, 1984, 1985; Cleveland-Innes & Emes, 2005; Hoy et al., 2012; Krovetz, 2007, 2016; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Ziskin, Hossler & Kim, 2009).

The relationship between humour and immediacy, and humour and the teacher-student relationship, is considered an under-explored field by current researchers (Gorham & Christophel 1990; Hagenauer & Volet 2014; Velez & Cano, 2008). A teacher's verbal and nonverbal transmissions, their positive influences on the emotional state (Frenzel et al., 2009), and their

relationship to perceived student-teacher immediacy (Christophel, 1990; Dalonges & Fried, 2016; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Mehrabian, 1966, 1967, 1971, 1981), represents a relevant and promising area of future research in higher education.

### **The Theoretical Framework**

The literature reveals no singular theory to support the use of humour as an effective pedagogical tool. As humour can, pedagogically, be considered both a verbal and non-verbal method of establishing student-teacher immediacy, the first theoretical framework anchoring this writer's research is Mehrabian's (1971, 1981) implicit communication theory.

The second theoretical framework referenced throughout much of the literature is Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. As the literature reveals an instructor's use of classroom humour can lead to greater degrees of student engagement and involvement (Andersen, 1979; Bain, 2011; Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990; Velez & Cano, 2008), Astin's theoretical framework (1984, 1985, 1993) becomes central to the exploration of the effects of humour and laughter in the higher education.

#### **Mehrabian's implicit communication theory (1971).**

In his seminal work on the psychology of communication, *Silent Messages* (1971, 1981), Mehrabian espouses two fundamental types of communication: explicit and implicit. A teacher verbally presenting a math theorem to a group of students, for example, is utilizing a form of explicit communication, as the goal of the transmission is to simply share data, content, and information (Velez & Cano, 2008). Implicit transactions, on the other hand, concern all manner of "feelings and attitudes above and beyond the content conveyed by speech" (Mehrabian, 1981, p.2), and, "assure the visitor we have not forgotten and are not neglecting him, even though we are talking to someone else" (Mehrabian, 1981, p. 79). Implicit communications concern the transmission of subtle information about "feelings, like-dislike, or attitude" (Mehrabian, 1981,



p.3), through predominantly nonverbal channels. Gorham (1988) suggests that the phenomenon of teacher immediacy can be understood within the larger framework of Mehrabian's (1971, 1981) implicit communication theory.

Mehrabian's (1971, 1981) implicit communication theory, and its relationship to student-teacher immediacy, anchors much of the extant literature concerning the ways in which classroom culture and climate is created. A nod, gesture, smile, or facial expression can convey a silent message (Mehrabian, 1971, 1981), and communicate information far more effectively than the more explicit written or verbal channels. The evidence Mehrabian presents around the impact of implicit communication and immediacy supposes, "...our proposition that characteristics of teaching and students' affect are closely intertwined" (Goetz et al. 2013, p.384). Mehrabian (1981) states:

People who have a greater awareness of the communicative significance of their actions not only can insure accurate communication of their own feelings, but also can be more successful in their intimate relationships, in artistic endeavors such as acting, or work that involves the persuasion, leadership and organization of others (p.iii).

**Astin's involvement theory (1984).**

Astin's involvement theory (1984) suggests that student learning, "...is a function of involvement in both the academic and social aspects of formal learning experiences" (Cleveland-Innes & Emes, 2005, p.94). In his claim that active engagement in the educational environment is pre-requisite to student growth and learning, Astin (1984) claims college educators, "play a significant role in creating opportunities for students to be involved in meaningful and transformational educational experiences" (Patton, Renn, Guido-DiBrito & Quaye, 2016, p.35). Astin's (1984) theoretical framework supports both qualitative and quantitative features of involvement, and suggests that teachers who create rich learning environments increase their

students' enjoyment, and therefore commitment of energy, to those environments. Much of the reviewed literature (Bryant et al., 1980; Chabeli, 2008, Chabeli et al., 2014; Garner, 2005; Huss & Eastep, 2016; Powell & Andresen, 1985) positively correlates teachers' pedagogical use of humour with student involvement, citing increases in student engagement and energetic outputs (Pollack & Freda, 1997; Tews et al. 2015; Warnock, 1989). Tews et al. (2015) explain that a relationship between the presence of fun in the classroom and student involvement exists because, by its very nature, fun "facilitates the conditions of engagement" (p.20).

Astin's (1984) theory of involvement was mentioned in the literature concerning humour and student teacher immediacy, as well. Astin (1985) suggests that any teacher consciously involving the students in their academic experience is providing that student a rich opportunity in which to invest physical and psychological energy. On the subject of involvement, Powell and Andresen (1985) declare that, due to the social, shared nature of laughter, humour is an ideal involvement tool. Regardless of whether the humour originates from the student, the teacher, or the subject matter, Powell and Andresen (1985) claim that laughter encourages active student engagement in class, and draws those students, who might otherwise be marginalized, into the learning. The researchers suggest there is a deeply gratifying satisfaction in "getting the joke" (Powell and Andresen, 1985, p.81), or being involved in a shared, funny moment. In this way, "humour and its appreciation...may be generally regarded as being of substantial value to teaching" (Powell & Andresen, 1985, p.81).

Astin's (1984) foundational framework has been forwarded by more current researchers, (Garner 2005; Graham, Papa & Brooks, 1992), who recognize that humour in pedagogical transmission can be an effective way of increasing cognitive, affective, or involved learning (Bain, 2004, 2011; Berk, 1996; Kher, Molstad, & Donahue, 1999; Speck, 1991; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). On the topic of student involvement, Robinson and Kakela (2006) suggest, "by

creating space for fun, interaction and trust, teachers and students can build a learning environment that promotes engagement, deep learning, and meaning” (p. 202).

Astin’s (1984) involvement framework anchors more contemporary perspectives around the creation of immediate learning environments (Babad, 2007; Chabeli et al., 2014; Cleveland-Innes & Emes 2005; Dalonges & Fried, 2016; Mulder, 2012; Velez & Cano, 2008), and provides a relevant foundation on which much of the current research on the use of humour, as a didactic tool in higher education, has been based. “The sheer amount of interaction between the individual student and the faculty has wide-spread effects on student development...(and) student-faculty interaction has its strongest positive correlations with satisfaction with faculty” (Astin, 1993, p.11).

### **The Operationalization of Humour: Theory to Practice**

In terms of how humour is operationalized from theory to practice, Bryant et al.’s (1979) study was the first to classify teacher humour into distinct categories. Much of the literature reviewed here recognizes the Bryant et al. (1979) study as foundational to the exploration and understanding of humour in higher education, as it was the first to not only categorize different kinds of humour, but analyze the impact of each distinct type on students.

Attempting to summarize the literature in terms of how humour is technically operationalized from theory to classroom is complex. Humour can be perceived as a generalized trait, or personality construct, (e.g., the possession of a sense of humour), or it can be considered a stand-alone, situational phenomenon (e.g., the telling of a joke). Humour can be operationalized and communicated in the classroom through any number of visual, physical, and verbal channels. With all of these variables, the impact of humour as a pedagogical phenomenon becomes a difficult construct to measure, primarily due to its subjective nature. For example, an educator may personally possess a robust sense of humour, but may choose not to incorporate

humour in the classroom with any degree of frequency (Graham, et al., 1992). Alternately, another instructor may make frequent use of humour, but because of its sarcastic, dark, or tasteless nature, may be perceived as distinctly un-funny (Chabeli, 2008; Chabeli et al., 2014; Torok et al., 2004).

A theme that emerges in the literature pertaining to a teacher's practical application of humour is the importance of considering the communication attitude and approach (Chabeli, 2008; Garner, 2005; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Huss & Eastep, 2016). Relevant research into the benefits of utilizing humour in higher education strongly supports faculty moving the theory of humour into consistent, concrete, pedagogical practice (Torok et al., 2004; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Warnock, 1989), but urges the careful consideration of attitude and approach as well.

Evidence supporting a correlation between distinctly humorous instruction methods, and student-teacher immediacy, was presented by Lowman (1994), who reported that students described their most effective college teachers as possessing a strong sense of humour, and acknowledged that displays of humour played a major role in creating warm, positive learning environments. Although there is much support across the literature for the intentional cultivation of immediacy in teaching, there is still little empirical evidence that an instructor's incorporation of humour, specifically, is a determining factor in attaining more intimate student-teacher relationships.

It is noted in much of the literature that the responsibility for the operationalization of humour in the classroom is not just that of the instructor. Some researchers argue that it is, in fact, a reciprocal, constructive practice, shared and co-created by both educators and students (Berk, 1996, 1998; Check, 1997; Civikly, 1986). Lei et al., (2010) note that communication

occurs as a flow between teachers and students, and that when used appropriately, humour becomes a communal, shared experience.

The literature over the past 40 years indicates that students prefer the inclusion of humour in their day-to-day experience of teaching, as it serves to, “greatly reduce student anxiety, to foster creativity, to enhance student learning, and...leads to higher rates of teacher effectiveness” (Tews et al., 2015, p.17). A study at a Canadian university found that the students preferred professors who exuded a positive attitude toward teaching, and to being in class (Delaney et al., 2010). Additionally, those instructors who injected stories, personal experiences, and humour into their lectures were perceived as friendlier, and therefore more likely to entertain student concerns and questions. Participants in Delaney et al.’s (2010) study cited students’ perceptions around the inclusion of certain teaching behaviours as conducive to the creation of a positive learning environment, including coming into class with a smile, greeting students by name, and chatting with students, either before or after class (Delaney et al., 2010). Garner (2005) concluded that students who perceived a low-intimidation classroom environment became better listeners and learners, and that that environment provided a more enjoyable educational experience for both the students, *and* their instructors.

When moving from theory to practice, researchers warn once again that there must be care and consideration taken when choosing to operationalize humour. For example, Zillmann (1977; cited in Zillmann, Williams, Bryant, Boynton & Wolf, 1980), supports a more traditional view of humour in higher education, warning that teachers seeking to develop a rapport with their students using humour as a mechanism for doing so, place themselves “at the risk of losing stature, and of being perceived as jokers” (p.170). This view is corroborated by more current researchers (Chabeli, 2008; Martin, 2007; Wanzer et al., 2006), who warn against the overuse of humour in the college classroom. Torok et al., (2004) offer a caution as well: “Excessive

humour can undermine the credibility of speakers, and have the opposite effect on student learning, making them bored or frustrated by the relentless string of jokes” (p. 331). Conversely, Decker (2007) argues avidly in support of a comic pedagogy, citing Dewey’s (1991) argument that seriousness and playfulness are, in fact, copasetic: “To be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition” (p.218). Decker (2007) does, however, also warn that humour should not be viewed an “invitation to anarchism” (p.6)

The overwhelming conclusion drawing from the literature concerning the operationalization of humour in higher education is that it is valuable. As an attribute to student learning, humour not only facilitates student attention, motivation, and comprehension of material, (Lei et al., 2010), it can also, at a fundamental level, serve to significantly increase overall student enjoyment (Berk, 1996, 1998; Bryant, et al., 1980; Chabeli, 2008; Tews et al., 2015; Pollak & Freda, 1997; Powell & Andresen, 1985; Torok et al., 2004; Ziv, 1988). Humour can deepen curricular engagement, increase mental sharpness, and increase social bonds through the creation of a more relaxed, positive learning atmosphere, in turn leading to greater student teacher immediacy, and learning (Christophel, 1990; Christophel & Gorham 1995; Gorham 1988; Lowman, 1994; Torok et al., 2014; Wanzer et al., 2010).

Although the literature already established that instructors who are perceived as humorous receive higher overall teacher ratings than those of their less funny or entertaining counterparts (Glenn, 2002), Glenn argues that the most effective instructors are those who view teaching as a theatrical opportunity. Similarly, Miller (1979), asserting that, “teaching is the highest form of showbiz” (1979, p. 11), explains that teachers are, essentially, on display, in a manner similar to that of an actor on stage. Miller (1979) points out it is the job of teachers to entertain if they wish to keep their students’ interest alive, and if they wish to be successful in imparting information. “Ya’ can’t teach ‘em if ya’ can’t reach ‘em” (Miller, 1979, p. 11). A

similar perspective is shared by Powell and Andresen (1985), who suggest that teachers would do well to be informed by theatrical wisdom: "...that the activity of teaching requires a sense of timing and alertness to the response of the learners...both skills of central importance in the communication of humour" (p. 88). Powell and Andresen (1985) go so far as to argue for the inclusion of professional skill development opportunities for educators in the area of applied classroom humour, stating, "Their wider deployment would not only be appreciated by students, but would also add to the happiness of teachers, an outcome greatly to be desired..." (p. 88).

The literature reviewed to this point has been largely concerned with the impact of humour on the student's experience of immediacy, satisfaction, and enjoyment, but less so on the *teacher's* experience of immediacy, satisfaction, and enjoyment. Humour, and its relationship to student academic self-efficacy, has been clearly acknowledged in decades of research (Babad, 2007; Bain, 2004; Bandura & Wessels, 1997; Berk, 1998; Bryant, et al., 1979; Christophel, 1990; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Warnock, 1989; Ziv, 1988). What has not been clearly established, however, is the influence, if any, that an instructor's use of humour in higher education has on his/her perceptions regarding the intimacy of their student-relationships, the effectiveness of his/her pedagogical practices, or his/her impression overall perceived teacher efficacy. The next section will discuss these topics.

### **Humour and Perceived Teacher Efficacy**

Teacher efficacy refers to, "the extent to which teachers believe that they have the capacity to affect student performance" (Ashton, 1984, p. 28). Guskey and Passaro (1994) assert that, although modern definitions vary, teacher efficacy was first discussed as an educational concept about 50 years ago, and, "can be traced to the early psychological research of Heider (1958), or White (1959)" (p.3). Currently, the widely accepted definition of teacher efficacy can

be attributed to Hoy (2000), as an educator's own feeling of confidence or belief in his/her ability to positively impact student learning and development, through teaching (Hoy, 2000).

Unlike the more commonly known concept of teacher effectiveness, which is often measured and determined by student pass/fail rates, or other quantifiable metrics, teacher efficacy is a subjective, affective, and therefore, a far more "elusive construct" (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) to measure. Wheatley (2005) points out, "teachers' efficacy beliefs may underestimate, overestimate, or accurately reflect, actual teaching effectiveness" (p. 749). Most often, teacher efficacy is evaluated through self-reporting tools representing a variety of teaching items in which teachers will reflect, and then rate themselves (Wheatley, 2005). In his work on teacher efficacy, Bandura (1997) developed an unpublished measure (undated) that has circulated among researchers (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Bandura (1997) points out, "a teacher's sense of efficacy is not necessarily uniform across the many different types of tasks they are asked to perform, nor cross different subject matter" (p.791). Despite its phenomenological nature, Wheatley (2005) highlights that, to date, most research studies on teaching efficacy have used quantitative, Likert-type scales to collect data, and so the data have been reduced to basic numeric levels, reflecting confidence, (or lack of confidence), in a variety of teaching areas. On the subject of how to pinpoint and measure the phenomena of teacher efficacy, Wheatley (2005) says, "teacher observations and interviews are extremely rare, and researchers frequently suggest the need for more interpretive research" (p.749).

The employment of specific pedagogical practices, like using humour, for example, can impact a teacher's self-perception of his/her ability to teach well. Evidence of an instructor's perception of their teaching effectiveness, and their use of an emotionally available teaching style, was found throughout the research (Christophel, 1990; Davidson, Feldman & Marglit, 2012; Frenzel, et al., 2009; Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2000; Patrick et al., 2000; Richmond, Gorham



& McCroskey, 1987; Schaller, & DeWine, 1993). Evans-Palmer's (2010) study on the connection between teacher humour and instructional effectiveness concluded that teachers who use humour tend to have higher morale, are more flexible, are more relaxed, and have increased perceived professional resilience. The article goes on to support the notion that relaxed teachers experience lower stress levels, and therefore enjoy greater teaching longevity, due to the connection they feel with their work, and the enjoyment they get from that connection (Evans-Palmer, 2010).

If instructors in higher education settings are convinced that their pedagogical inputs (energy, humour, or creativity, for example), create positive, immediate learning environments that draw students in, and increase student gains, this, naturally, will positively impact on their perceived effectiveness as teachers (Duckworth et al., 2009). Duckworth et al., (2009) assert that instructors who receive positive feedback on their teaching by way of student success or apparent student enjoyment, receive implicit messages of validation on their teaching skills. As Bandura (1997) points out, the most effective way for anyone, child or adult, student or teacher, to develop a strong sense of efficacy, is through mastery experiences. Thus, if a teacher receives positive student feedback and feels that s/he is affecting the student positively, logically then, that teacher's perception of their level of teaching mastery increases, translating into a heightened perception of personal teacher efficacy (Hoy, et al., 2012).

Citing a type of Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), Protheroe (2008) contends that the greater a college instructor's belief in his/her personal ability to enable students to overcome academic difficulties, the more likely these instructors are to exhibit specific teaching behaviours that support this belief. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy: The teacher, having internalized a positive belief concerning his/her teaching abilities, will demonstrate confident, empowered teaching behaviours in the classroom. The cycle is complete when a

student mirrors self-confidence back to the teacher. This cycle positively reinforces the instructor's beliefs around his/her teacher effectiveness, and so the feedback loop continues. The idea of a feedback loop is supported by Gorham and Zakahi (1990) who note that a relationship exists between high levels of perceived teaching efficacy, and instructors who create reciprocal, connected relationships between themselves, and their students.

In terms of teacher efficacy, Yeager and Dweck (2012) find a teacher's personal enjoyment of the classroom experience correlates to an increase in perceived teaching effectiveness. This view supports a pervasive theme noted throughout the literature, that teachers who intentionally create positive classroom climates, whether through humour, or other means, not only have a cumulative, long-lasting effect on *student* enjoyment, but on their own, as well. Elusive and multidimensional (Guskey & Passaro, 1994) as the construct of teacher efficacy might be, Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) state, "As the construct...enters its third decade, it is ready to be put to work" (p. 239). Finally, in a bid to re-conceptualize teacher efficacy, Wheatley (2005) warns that educational researchers must expand their educational studies to include the phenomenon, or face consequences: "Scholars studying democratic education reforms have suggested that reforms that do not address teacher efficacy are doomed" (Wheatley, 2005, p.748).

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations identified with the research studies presented in the literature. One limitation lies in the validity and reliability of the data generated by the instruments used in much of the salient research. When teachers were the subjects of the studies pertaining to their use of humour, for example, like most of the variables used in those studies, their involvement measures were largely self-reported, making it difficult for researchers to distinguish between accurate data, and inaccurate data.

Specifically concerning the studies around humour and student teacher immediacy, the literature revealed limitations concerning the length and scope of the studies. Many of the studies were immediate, or short term. Several researchers (Berk, 1998; Tews et al., 2015; Torok et al., 2004; Ziv, 1988) agree that longitudinal surveys are a more appropriate method for satisfying research questions that strive to answer the long-term impact of specific pedagogical behaviours or practices.

Another limitation emerging in the literature concerns the construct validation of the various scales measuring humour, and teacher efficacy. Attempting to quantify such highly subjective, multi-faceted phenomena with any degree of accuracy is recognized in much of the literature as an ongoing challenge (Bryant et al., 1980; Tews et al., 2015). Additionally, the relatively transparent nature of the questions on the reporting instruments making them particularly vulnerable to social desirability bias. Questions like, “How well can you respond to difficult questions from your students?” (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001, p. 800), from the Ohio State teacher efficacy scale, might be influenced by a subject’s social desirability bias, thereby skewing or distorting the data. To this end, limitations were self-identified in the work of Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001), and Shaughnessy (2004), who suggested that different methodologies might be explored in future studies (e.g., use of an qualitative, rather than quantitative research format), when collecting data on teacher efficacy.

### **Future Research and Conclusions**

In response to a lack of unequivocal, empirical evidence around the significance of laughter in the college classroom, Bryant, et al. (1980), suggest that researchers in educational psychology have had a “blind spot” (p. 512) regarding the place of humour in higher education. Although Ziv’s (1988) longitudinal study of 1,353 first year university students is useful in understanding how humour influenced their perceptions of their teachers’ effectiveness, the

study did not measure how an instructor's use of humour impacts the *teachers'* perceptions of their teaching practice. From the review of the literature presented here, it is apparent that scholarly interest in the areas of humour, immediacy, and teacher efficacy, are under-researched, but increasing.

Much of the literature reviewed on the topic of humour in higher education classrooms concerned the impact of humour from the student's perspective, however data were limited on faculty perceptions of humour in the classroom, and even less so the perceptions of Canadian college instructors. Additionally, the extent literature provided little evidence either for, or against, the relationship between college instructors' use of humour, and their self-perceptions around teacher effectiveness. Only the research of Gorham and Christophel (1990) concluded with any degree of certainty that teachers utilizing verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviours perceive their own effectiveness as educators more favourably than those who do not.

Mehrabian's (1966, 1971) foundational work in immediacy is essential to future research, and Astin's (1984) involvement theory, especially his recent research around what matters most in college (1993), is of great relevance as well. The literature reviewed here provides an emerging picture of humour in higher education, and suggests a fundamental lack of robust, empirical evidence documenting the relationship between a college teacher's use of humour, its impact on student-teacher relationships, and its subsequent impact on a teacher's level of perceived effectiveness. Longitudinal studies utilizing qualitative research methods seem the most appropriate way to identify and qualify relationships between these phenomena. If humour is, indeed, "...one way we can be pyromaniacs and fuel those fires of curiosity in our students" (Torok, et al, 2004, p.19), then observing and identifying relationships between these phenomena is a promising way forward in the area of scholarly educational research and a humorous pedagogy.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

#### Introduction and Overview

Humour is used widely by instructors in North American college classrooms as, "...a catalyst for classroom magic" (Kher, Molstad & Donahue, 1999, p.1). As a pedagogical tool, instructor humour has been positively correlated with increases in student academic achievement and enjoyment (Garner, 2006; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Warnock, 1989; Ziv, 1988) for over 40 years. Historically, though, the use of humour in traditional higher education has been discouraged (Feldman, 1976), with professors believing either their role as a scholar, or the content they were teaching, far too serious to be presented lightly (Bryant, Comisky & Zillmann, 1979). In recent years, however, there has been an attitude shift. Recent studies concerning the preferences of college students have concluded that instructor humour, when used appropriately, is a highly desirable teaching trait in higher education classrooms (Bain, 2011; Berk, 1996; Decker 2007; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999).

Garner's (2006) declaration that, "ha-ha can lead to aha!" (p.177), is supported across much of the current literature pertaining to humour in higher education, and the acknowledgement that humour, shared between teachers and students, enhances student learning, has now become the prevailing sentiment among many current educational researchers (Martin, 2001; McMorris, Kim & Li, 2001; Robinson & Kakela, 2006; Torok, McMorris & Lin, 2004; Weimer, 2009).

The existing body of research pertaining to humour in higher education has been dominated by studies examining its benefits to student learning and enjoyment, and has established a robust relationship between a teacher's use of humour, and improved student outcomes (Check, 1997; Machlev & Karlin, 2016; Powell & Andresen, 1985; Torok et al., 2004; Zillmann, 1977). Far less is known, however, about how or why college instructors, particularly those from Canada, use humour in their teaching, or its effects on student-teacher immediacy,

and perceived teacher-efficacy. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to understand how and why college instructors intentionally use humour in their classrooms, and to explore their perceptions of its effects on their student-teacher relationships, and perceived levels of teacher-efficacy.

The study took place at a large college in southwestern Ontario, hereafter referred to as Aspen College, or, the study college. This qualitative study examined humour and its use from the perspective of the college instructor, a perspective chronically under-researched. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research paradigms and purpose of the study, introduce the central research questions, identify the population and sample used in the research, confirm the study's data collection methodology, instrumentation, and analysis procedures, and to provide an outline the ethical considerations of the study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to understand how and why college instructors intentionally use humour in their classrooms, and to explore their perceptions of its effects on their student-teacher relationships, and perceived levels of teacher-efficacy.

### **Central Research Question**

How do college instructors intentionally use humour to create student-teacher immediacy, and how do they perceive this impacts their effectiveness as teachers?

### **Research Sub-questions**

1. What benefits do college instructors perceive in using humorous pedagogical tools in college classrooms?
2. How do college instructors use humour to create higher levels of student-teacher immediacy?

3. In what ways does using humour in teaching affect college instructors' teaching enjoyment?
4. How do college instructors who use humour in their teaching practices, perceive the quality of their teaching?

### **Research Design**

As the aim of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to examine and understand the subjective, lived experience of instructors' perceptions of pedagogical humour, selected instructors were invited to participate in private, face-to-face interviews at the study college to discuss their use of humour in the instructional classroom. Additionally, the researcher used a self-assessment tool on humour orientation (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991) as an inductive tool to triangulate data generated from the interviews. The researcher acted as the primary instrument for gathering, and interpreting, any and all data related to the study. The study took place at a single Canadian community college, Aspen College, within the 2018 academic year. Considerations around data availability, collection, and interpretation were incorporated into the structure and timing of this research, and are presented in this chapter.

### **Population and Sample**

The study examined the lived experience of a purposeful sample of 10 instructors from across multiple programs at Aspen College within the Faculty of Health, Community Studies, and Public Safety, excluding the researcher's own. As one part of this study explored the human relations phenomena of student-teacher immediacy, examining the lived experience of instructors within just the Faculty of Health, Community Studies, and Public Safety, rather than across the larger College, was a carefully considered choice. Housing programs like Developmental Services Worker, Human Services Foundation, Advanced Care Paramedic, Child and Youth Worker, and Early Childhood Education, teachers within the Faculty of Health,

Community Studies, and Public Safety made an ideal population sub-set for this study, due to the soft skills and affective human relations content common to many of the courses taught across a number of its programs.

With the teacher population at Aspen College sitting at over 700 full-time, part-time and partial load faculty, interviewing, and compiling research data for that large a number of participants, was beyond the scope of this study. Surveying only full-time, experienced instructors within the Faculty of Health, Community Studies, and Public Safety created a manageable, cross-program sampling frame that lent specificity to the data results. This selected population sample provided a satisfactory number of instructors to sufficiently capture diversity across programs, while allowing for rich, qualitative study themes, patterns, and conclusions to emerge.

In terms of criteria, instructors selected to participate in the study were required to have a minimum of three years full-time teaching experience. This status ensured study participants had sufficient personal experience in the teaching-learning environment in order to evidence the phenomena of instructor humour, and its perceived effects on student-teacher immediacy, and teaching-efficacy. Additionally, study participants were required to admit to consciously operationalizing a humorous pedagogical approach, through either, (a) active employment of a generally humorous teaching disposition, or, (b) regular use of specific humorous pedagogical tools in their practice of teaching, or both. Additionally, study participants were asked to have the ability to articulate their lived experiences (Van Manen, 2014). Using a snowball sampling technique (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the researcher created a diverse pool of appropriate candidates. The population sample represented a wide, and richly diverse demography, including diversity across age, gender, experience, and teaching disciplines. Access to the sample population was granted by virtue of the researcher's status as full-time faculty within Aspen



College's School of Community Studies.

### **Data Collection**

Instructors recommended to the researcher by way of the snowball sampling method received an emailed invitation from the researcher to participate in the study via, the College's Outlook email system. The email contained a personal introduction of the researcher, a brief outline of the purpose of the study, information on the data collection methods of the study, thanks for considering participation in the study, and an attached free and informed consent form, and interview consent form, for those wishing to participate. Potential participants were respectfully asked to complete the attached forms and return them to the researcher by their interview date, if they wished to participate. Study candidates who did not respond to the initial email within the designated timeframe received a second email, in a further attempt to engage. Non-response was interpreted by the researcher as a lack of desire to participate in the study, and was not pursued further.

Any and all data, including, but not limited to, emails, consent forms, field notes, and interview transcriptions, was stored on two separate external USB flash drive devices. Both were securely passworded for use by the researcher alone. Data were organized in a clearly labeled, hierarchal folder structure on both devices. Any and all data files containing personal or identifiable data, such as names, were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms. Both devices were stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's office at Aspen College, to which only the researcher had a key. Specific data and metadata were not shared with anyone other than the researcher, and the researcher's capstone supervisor. The completed study and its findings, were, however, freely shared with any and all interested participants. When the data are to be destroyed, the researcher will physically destroy both USB flash drive devices.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

As this was a qualitative study, the researcher acted as the primary instrument for data collection. Two data collection methodologies were used in this study: (1) personal interviews, (2) a questionnaire: The Humor Orientation Scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991). Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were held in a private, quiet interview room located in Office D-3018, at Aspen College, between the researcher, and each research participant. A pre-determined sequence of relevant, open-ended questions, designed to answer the main research question, and its sub-questions, were asked, in the hopes of obtaining the instructors' perceptions of the research phenomena. The predetermined sequence of questions allowed for more easily comparable data among subjects, and allowed for the collection of rich, descriptive data. An interview schedule was developed to ensure consistency and timeliness in the interview process. The rationale for including open-ended questions lay in their subjective interpretation. Open-ended questions allowed respondents considerable latitude in determining the quality and quantity of their answers, and supported the emergent nature of this qualitative study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Prior to interviewing the research subjects, the interview questions were tested for face validity with three of the researcher's colleagues. The interview questions were edited accordingly.

The researcher used conversational, facilitative interview skills to elicit in-depth information about the lived experiences of the college instructors pertaining to their use of humour in the classroom, its effects on student-teacher relationships, and its effects on perceived teaching efficacy. Interviews began with prompting questions, including those designed to ascertain demographics, and then followed the established sequence. Interviews lasted 30-105 minutes. To prevent data-loss due to equipment failure, interviews were recorded simultaneously on a passworded iPhone device, and a privately-owned Tascam DR-05 digital audio recorder. Light, supplementary field notes were taken by the researcher during the

interviews pertaining to expression, body language, and atmosphere, as a means of enriching data collection (Plano, Clark & Creswell, 2010), but were not considered a primary source of data. The researcher wrote detailed reflections following each interview, and stored these digitally as Word documents on both flash drives.

Data generated from the face-to-face interviews was triangulated for consistencies, or inconsistencies, using the Humor Orientation Scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991) questionnaire, which was completed by each research participant, and submitted to the researcher, following the face-to-face interview. While questionnaires are most often associated with a quantitative research approach, this researcher felt the instrument would provide some useful information on study subjects' self-perceptions of their general humour disposition, and would be a value-add to the qualitative research process.

### **Data Analysis**

Once interviews were completed, they were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms, before being transcribed from audio to digital text using the Trint online automated transcription service. The researcher selected Trint, over manual transcription, due to the reported speed and accuracy of the speech-to-text auto-transcription, and verification tools (Trint, 2018). The researcher maintained the privacy and security of the raw data through the utilization of a private, passworded, Trint account. As Trint is an automated transcription service, no one, other than the researcher, saw the data, or had access to the files. "No one (not even us) can access your Trints (interview transcripts) unless you decide to actively share them" (Trint, 2018). Once the researcher received the interview text transcriptions back from Trint, they were checked word for word against the audio recordings in order to correct, edit, or verify information and data.

Prior to coding and analyzing the data, the researcher engaged in member checks with each of the study subjects, to check the raw interview data for validity and accuracy. The

member check process ensured that each participant's account of his/her interview resonated with that individual, and ensured that the researcher had interpreted and reported the instructors' stories and subjective experience correctly (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Once validation was assured, the researcher began analyzing the data.

Analysis began in an attempt to identify similarities, extract themes, identify relationships, and highlight differences in the data in order to draw conclusions. Inductive coding took place in order to divide the data into meaningful descriptive, thematic, and analytic units. First Cycle coding methods, including attribute, a priori, and descriptive codes, were first established and applied against the raw data manually by the researcher. Once the first cycle of coding was complete, data were further analyzed, with the researcher eventually settling on 8 anchor codes, and 51 child codes.

As the researcher was working alone, security and privacy was assured. Only the researcher had specific access privileges to the data. All data, including the interview text transcriptions, the researcher's field notes, reflections recorded post-interview, and completed Humor Orientation Scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1994) questionnaires, were eventually coded and analyzed by the researcher.

Significant statements, data sets, clustered themes, and recurring topics were analyzed and duly recorded. The resulting patterns and themes were exported into a thick, inclusive, and exhaustive summary of findings. After Chapters 4 and 5 of the study were written and submitted to the study supervisor, a personalized thank-you note was sent to each of the study participants, along with an invitation to receive a digital, PDF copy of the completed study, and its findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The consideration of ethics pertaining to the safety and wellness of the study participants, and the integrity of the researcher, were of paramount importance in the planning and design of

this research study, and continued to be of primary importance during the data collection and analysis stages of the study. Prior to the planning of this study, the researcher participated in TCPS 2: CORE training, earning the certificate of completion (March 21, 2017). Prior to the start of the data collection process, the researcher was granted approvals from both Central Michigan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and Aspen College's Research Ethics Board, (REB), to conduct the study. Research and data collection only got underway once clearance and approval for the project was been received in writing from both institutions. Once consent was received from IRB, a copy of the IRB letter of approval was sent to the REB office at Aspen College.

Prior to study participant interviews, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, and advised of their rights to select out of the study at any time. Written consent to participate was obtained from all participants using the permissions template provided to this researcher by Central Michigan University, with express permission granted for the research interview, and the researcher's use of recording devices for data collection. Confidentiality of the data was assured at all stages of the research study through the careful use of password protected USB flash drives, locked storage, and the use of reputable, secure, web-based data transcription and analysis tools.

As data validity was assured through the triangulation of interviews and questionnaires, the researcher's findings were both credible, and dependable. Relevant citations from the study subjects were incorporated heavily into the study's findings, according to the description of the methodology used by the researcher in the study. The researcher hopes the findings of this qualitative, phenomenological study have validity and applicability outside of the sample population within the Faculty of Health, Community Studies, and Public Safety, and can be shared across college programs, with a view to increasing the quality of humorous pedagogical

interventions aimed at promoting closer student-teacher relationships, and increasing college instructors' perceptions of their overall teaching effectiveness.

### **Timeline**

The timeline for this research project began with the submission of this proposal to the study supervisor, Dr. Kaleb Patrick, on May 13, 2018. The proposal was successfully defended with Dr. Patrick over Skype, on Wednesday, May 16, 2018. Research applications were submitted immediately following the successful defense to Central Michigan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and to Aspen College's Research Ethics Board, (REB), for approval. As the study was considered low risk, the researcher received no delays in the approval process. Final approvals were received on May 31, 2018.

With clearance and approval for the project received in writing from both institutions, research and data collection got underway on June 4, 2018. In the interim week, the researcher contacted the Coordinators of participating programs in the College's Faculty of Health, Community Studies, and Public Safety, and asked for recommendations on faculty candidates who fit the criteria for sample selection for the study. Additionally, the researcher drafted the research study email invitation, and began developing a pool of potential study candidates, based on responses as they were received from the various Program Coordinators. Data collection began June 4, 2018, and was completed June 29, 2018. Chapter 4 (Data Analysis) was completed and submitted August 1, 2018, and Chapter 5 (Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations) was completed and submitted August 11, 2018. The final, polished capstone project was submitted for consideration October 6, 2018.

## Chapter 4 - Data Analysis

In this chapter, the findings from the study are presented in relation to the research questions on instructor perceptions of humour in teaching, and its perceived effects on student-teacher immediacy, and teacher-efficacy. The chapter will begin with a brief overview of the study and the data analysis processes. The remainder of the chapter will be dedicated to data analysis. Rationales will be presented for analysis methodology, including coding methods, and how themes were developed. Themes and sub-themes will be presented, supported by relevant participant transcript quotes and excerpts, as they pertain to the main research question and four sub-questions of the study. Conclusions and recommendations based on the analysis will follow in Chapter 5.

In order to be included in the study population, candidates were required to identify as a full-time college instructor who consciously operationalized a humorous pedagogical approach through either, (a) active employment of a generally humorous teaching disposition, or, (b) regular use of specific humorous pedagogical tools in their practice of teaching, or both. Within the sample population, three of the ten research participants were colleagues with whom I had engaged in casual conversation at the study college. For the remaining seven, the interviews marked the first time I was either meeting, or conversing with the study participants.

The diversity of instructor personalities and teaching specializations was reflected in an impressive variety of verbal and nonverbal humour practices, each valued and operationalized differently according to the instructor's teaching background, student audience, subject matter, and overarching teaching philosophy.

Ultimately, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to understand how and why college instructors intentionally use humour in their classrooms, and to explore their perceptions of its effects on their student-teacher relationships, and perceived levels

of teacher-efficacy. This study posed a central research question, “How do college instructors intentionally use humour to create student-teacher immediacy, and how do they perceive this impacts their effectiveness as teachers?” Four sub-questions followed:

1. What benefits do college instructors perceive in using humorous pedagogical tools in college classrooms?
2. How do college instructors use humour to create higher levels of student-teacher immediacy?
3. In what ways does using humour in teaching affect college instructors’ teaching enjoyment?
4. How do college instructors who use humour in their teaching practices, perceive the quality of their teaching?

Each of these questions, and its themes and sub-themes, will be examined in this chapter.

### **Study Parameters**

This study examined the lived experience of ten full-time college instructors from the Faculty of Health, Community Studies, and Public Safety at a large community college in southwestern Ontario. The study explored the instructors’ opinions and beliefs on humour, its role in college-level teaching, and its perceived effects on student-teacher immediacy, and teacher efficacy. The instructors participated in private, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with me at the study college, each averaging approximately 40 minutes. Additionally, each study participant completed a short questionnaire, the Humor Orientation Scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991) as a means of determining humour orientation.

Participant responses to the pre-set interview questions provided this writer significant insight into which specific humour tools were used in college classrooms, the frequency of their use, the perceived impact of their use, and the values, attitudes and beliefs (Saldaña, 2009)



driving the application of each humour tool. Each participant presented with strongly developed working theories supporting their use of humour in teaching in higher education. The insights gathered from these participants through decades of collective teaching experience at the study college provided a rich platform of local knowledge on which to base their responses to each of the study questions, and made for some lively discussion. In order to maximize the richness of the data, I made brief field notes during each interview, and wrote detailed reflections on my impressions and observations of each instructor's projected attitude, demeanor, voice tone, and general conduct following each interview, as a means of clarifying and expanding on my initial impressions.

Interview audio files were anonymized, uploaded, and processed through Trint, a web-based transcription service. Each of the resulting text transcripts was compared numerous times against its original audio recording for accuracy, and was corrected/amended accordingly. Repeated listening resulted in the addition of parenthesized physical and nonverbal nuances into the transcripts, (laughter, facial expressions, physical gesturing), plus notes on relevant participant voice modulations and inflections conveying emphasis, emotion, or meaning. Working closely with the data allowed me capture and record implicit and explicit communication subtleties. I became deeply familiar with the data contained within each interview. In addition to several a priori codes established prior to the start of the interviews, and congruent with the iterative and emerging qualitative research process, multiple reviews of the data prompted the emergence of specific codes and categories.

Prior to analyzing the data, each participant's interview transcript was emailed to him/her to check for data validity, and text accuracy. These member checks ensured I had reported the participants' stories, subjective experience, and question responses correctly (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Once validation was assured, I began analyzing the data.

## Coding

Prior to the interviews, I established four broad a priori codes that aligned with the research questions: (1) humour benefits, (2) humour vehicles, (3) humour and immediacy, and (4) humour and teacher-efficacy. The initial a priori codes eventually developed into 6 anchor codes (Adu, 2013), and 51 child codes. Deep engagement with the data allowed codes to evolve, integrating (Weiss, 2016) relevant information from multiple sources, including interview transcripts, field observations, post-interview reflections, and data from the questionnaires.

Part of this study sought to identify and compare the application of specific humorous teaching tools. Therefore, the anchor codes, and many of the child codes, were descriptive in nature, shaped by the context, subjective viewpoints, and lived experience of the participants. In a conscious effort to employ researcher reflexivity, several codes reflect specific language verbalized by research participants during the interviews, thus preventing insertion of my own biases around humour in higher education into the wording of the codes. Using participant words and language to shape the nature and breadth of the codes, rather than my own, allowed codes and themes to emerge in the voices of the participants, thereby preserving the integrity and validity of the data. In vivo coding is used extensively in the Results section of this chapter.

Codes were organized in a tree diagram, and created through an online mind-mapping platform, Mindmeister (Mindmeister.com, 2018). Colours in the code tree are the same as those used in the initial hand-coding that took place, prior to the digital creation of the code tree. Child Codes are a blend of Descriptive Codes, Values Codes, and the more action-oriented Process Codes (gerunds/ “-ing” words). The code tree diagram and text summary are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

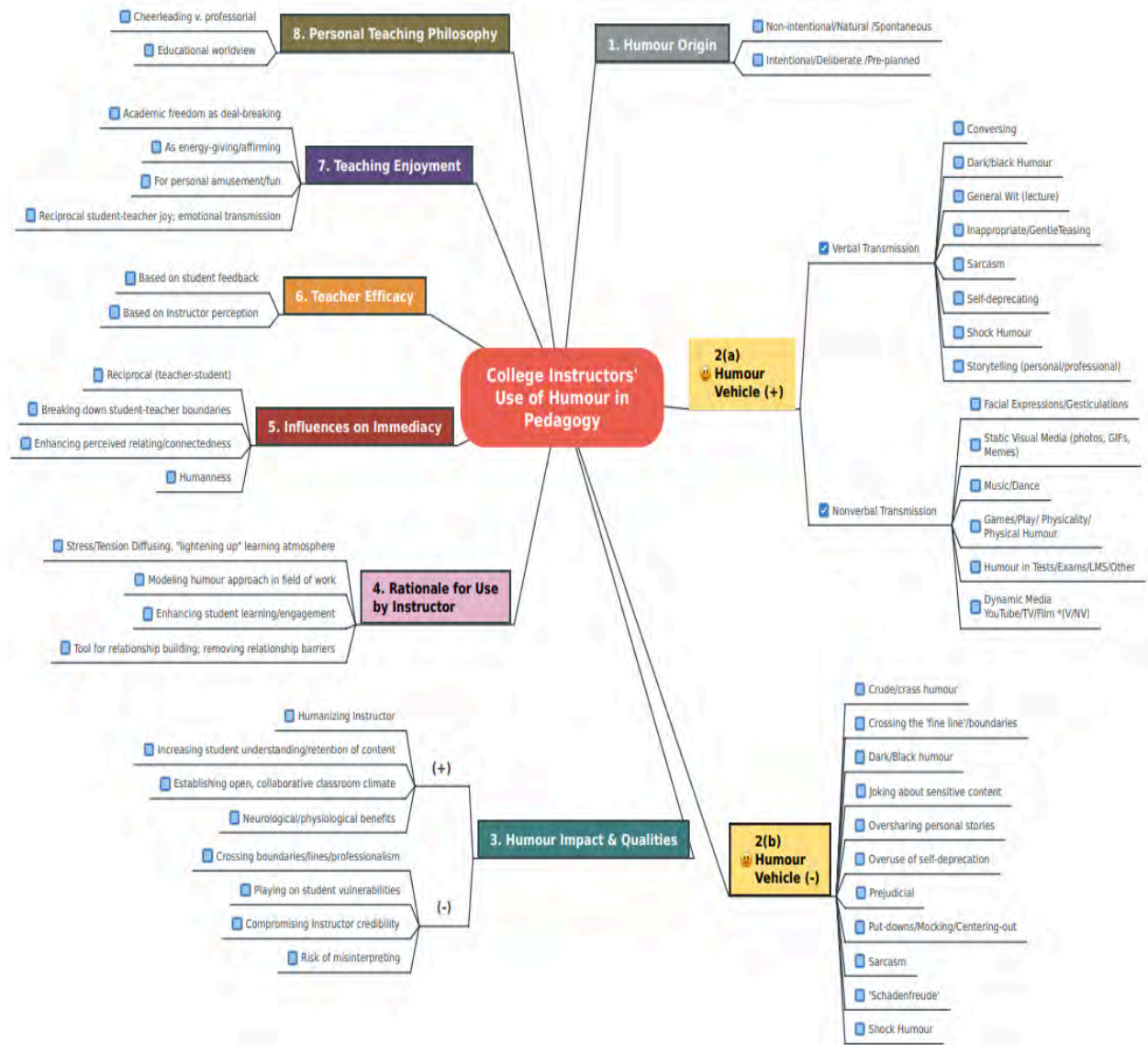


Figure 1. Code tree diagram

Major thematic codes generated from personal interviews with full-time college instructors:

- Coloured anchor codes (8) reflect instructors’ lived experiences regarding the use of humour in teaching
- Subordinate child codes (51) elaborate on each anchor code, and are designated with a blue square.

<p><b>1. Humour Origin</b></p> <p>1.1. Non-intentional/Natural/Spontaneous 1.2. Intentional/Deliberate/Pre-planned</p> <p><b>2(a) Humour Vehicle (+)</b></p> <p>2.1. <i>Verbal Transmission</i></p> <p>2.1.1. Conversing 2.1.2. Dark/black Humour 2.1.3. General Wit (lecture) 2.1.4. Inappropriate/Gentle Teasing 2.1.5. Sarcasm 2.1.6. Self-deprecating 2.1.7. Shock Humour 2.1.8. Storytelling (personal/professional)</p> <p>2.2. <i>Nonverbal Transmission</i></p> <p>2.2.1. Facial Expressions/Gesticulations 2.2.2. Static Visual Media (photos, GIFs, Memes) 2.2.3. Music/Dance 2.2.4. Games/Play/ Physicality/ Physical Humour 2.2.5. Humour in Tests/Exams/LMS/Other 2.2.6. Dynamic Media: YouTube/TV/Film *(<i>Can be Verbal/Nonverbal</i>)</p> <p><b>2(b) Humour Vehicle (-)</b></p> <p>2.1. Crude/crass humour 2.2. Crossing the 'fine line'/boundaries 2.3. Dark/Black humour 2.4. Joking about sensitive content 2.5. Over-sharing personal stories 2.6. Overuse of self-deprecation 2.7. Prejudicial humour 2.8. Put-downs/Mocking/Centering-out 2.9. Sarcasm 2.10. 'Schadenfreude' (<i>Shameful joy</i>) 2.11. Shock humour</p>	<p><b>3. Humour Impact &amp; Qualities</b></p> <p>3.1. <i>Positive (+)</i></p> <p>3.1.1. Humanizing Instructor 3.1.2. Increasing student understanding/retention of content 3.1.3. Establishing open, collaborative classroom climate 3.1.4. Neurological/physiological benefits</p> <p>3.2. <i>Negative (-)</i></p> <p>3.2.1. Crossing boundaries/lines/professionalism 3.2.2. Playing on student vulnerabilities 3.2.3. Compromising Instructor credibility 3.2.4. Risk of misinterpretation</p> <p><b>4. Rationale for Use by Instructor</b></p> <p>4.1. Stress/Tension Diffusing, "lightening up" learning atmosphere 4.2. Modeling humour approach in field of work 4.3. Enhancing student learning/engagement 4.4. Tool for relationship building; removing relationship barriers</p> <p><b>5. Influences on Immediacy</b></p> <p>5.1. Reciprocal (teacher-student) 5.2. Breaking down student-teacher boundaries 5.3. Enhancing perceived relating/connectdness 5.4. Humanness</p> <p><b>6. Teacher Efficacy</b></p> <p>6.1. Based on student feedback 6.2. Based on Instructor perception</p> <p><b>7. Teaching Enjoyment</b></p> <p>7.1. Academic freedom as deal-breaking 7.2. Energy-giving/affirming 7.3. For personal amusement/fun 7.4. Reciprocal student-teacher joy; emotional transmission</p> <p><b>8. Personal Teaching Philosophy</b></p> <p>8.1. Cheerleading v. professorial 8.2. Educational worldview</p>
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Figure 2. Code tree anchor codes and child codes: Summary

## Themes and Sub-themes

In response to the research questions, six major themes, and seven subthemes emerged from participant narratives:

### **Theme 1: effective use of instructor humour enhances everyone's experience.**

Sub-theme: *Humour benefits student wellbeing.*

Sub-theme: *Humour enhances classroom climate.*

### **Theme 2: student-teacher immediacy is increased through differing communication channels and humour vehicles.**

Sub-theme: *Instructors have uniquely diverse approaches in their operationalization of humour.*

### **Theme 3: humour humanizes instructors and increases their relatability.**

Sub-theme: Instructors use humour approaches that mirror those found in their respective vocational work environments.

Sub-theme: *Immediacy is fostered through illustrative storytelling.*

### **Theme 4: using the wrong kind of humour will negatively impact immediacy.**

Sub-theme: *Instructors must know their audience, and the "fine line".*

### **Theme 5: teaching enjoyment is linked to an instructor's perceived academic and philosophical freedoms.**

### **Theme 6: effective use of humour positively impacts self-perceived teacher efficacy**

Sub-theme: *teacher-efficacy is anchored in student perceptions around instructor credibility.*

In order to contextualize the data, each theme and sub-theme will be explained and supported with salient participant quotes and excerpts generated from the interviews.

## Demographic Data

For this study, a group of 10 college instructors were interviewed, and consisted of 6 females and 4 males, ranging in age from 41 to 62 years. All research participants were from various programs within the Faculty of Health, Community Studies, and Public Safety. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Pseudonyms were based on characters from Shakespeare's comedic play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595). The demographic data listing the instructors' pseudonyms, ages, teaching areas, and years of related full-time teaching experience at the study college is presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Study Participant Demographic Information*

Participant Pseudonym	Age (Years)	Gender	Years F/T Teaching at Study College	Division: Faculty of Health, Community Studies, & Public Safety
1. Thisbe	52	F	10	Community Studies
2. Artemis	54	F	15	Community Studies
3. Oberon	48	M	5	Community Studies
4. Titania	41	F	5	Public Safety
5. Helena	44	F	4	Community Studies
6. Lysander	62	M	14	Community Studies
7. Peasblossom	55	F	10	Community Studies
8. Hippolyta	43	F	4	Community Studies
9. Demetrius	48	M	14	Health Sciences & Nursing
10. Puck	49	M	6	Public Safety

### **Triangulation**

Data from the interviews were triangulated through interview field notes, and the reflections written post-interview. Additionally, the more quantitative Humour Orientation Scale

(Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991) was used as an additional measure to assess the research subjects' abilities to encode and transmit humour in interpersonal situations.

I was assured of the Humor Orientation Scale (HOS) instrument's suitability for use in my study through its inclusion in a number of other studies examining humour dimensionality, especially as it pertained to the communication of humour (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1995; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1996), instructors' self-perceptions of humour, and impact on student learning (Aylor & Opplinger, 2003; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999), and how humour orientation impacts perceived professional credibility (Wrench & Booth-Butterfield, 2003). "Previous research has shown the scale to be unidimensional with good reliability and test-retest stability" (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 2009, p. 146). Thus, I perceived the HOS to be a reliable, valid measure of individual differences in both the production, and communication, of humour. Therefore, at the end of each interview, each study participant was given a copy of the HOS questionnaire to fill out and return to me.

The HO scale is a 17-item, self-report measurement with a Likert-scale response format (1 = Strongly Disagree, to 5 = Strongly Agree). The tool measures the communicator's perceived predisposition to being funny in relation to their abilities to tell and recall jokes, and stories. Additionally, respondents are asked to assess audience response to their attempts at humour, and perception of their overall "funniness". Scale scores can range from a low of 17, to a high of 85 (a 68-point spread). When scoring the instrument, negative statement scores are reversed. Interestingly, Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield provide no guide or criteria to on how to interpret raw scores. Attempts to contact the Booth-Butterfields for clarification were unsuccessful. The closest I came to finding any guide on the interpretation of raw scores was in a NACADA journal article by Wrench and Punyanunt-Carter (2008), stating:

In the realm of HO (Humor Orientation) research, people are commonly referred to as high or low HO. High HOs score on the upward end of the scale and regularly use humor as a tool for engaging in interpersonal relationships. Low HOs rarely, if ever, use humor as a tool for engaging in interpersonal relationships (p.56).

Using this as my guide, I therefore designated any study participant scoring in the top 20% of the scale (Raw score 68/85 or higher) as having a High HO, and any participant scoring 50% or lower (Raw score 43/85 or lower), as having a Low HO. The HO results for the subjects of my study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Humor Orientation Scale Results by Participant*

Participant	Raw HOS Score	Humor Orientation (HO = High/ LO = Low)
Thisbe	68	HO
Artemis	67	-
Helena	74	HO
Oberon	67	-
Lysander	64	-
Peasblossom	67	-
Titania	56	-
Hippolyta	61	-
Demetrius	65	-
Puck	78	HO

Only 3 of the 10 study subjects achieved scores high enough to designate them with a High HO.

The remaining 7 study subjects fell in an uncategorized range, between 56 and 67 points, out of a possible 85 points.



Of the 17 questions on the instrument, 11 pertain to joke telling, 8 to one's ability to tell humorous stories, 2 to overall use of humour, and 1 question asks for a comparison to others (e.g., *Of all the people I know, I am one of the funniest*). Eleven questions are specific to verbal communication, and the other 6 are ambiguous (*My friends would say I am a funny person*). No questions pertain to humour manifest in nonverbal channels. Thus, two study subjects, Peasblossom and Oberon, who scored high in their use of multiple humour vehicles in the nonverbal channel, were not assigned a high humor orientation, despite my observations, and the data from their interview narratives, which was clearly to the contrary. Certainly, specific HOS (1991) question scores around storytelling and joke telling were high across participants, confirming and corroborating the interview data that emerged in vivo. Overall, however, I was puzzled that only 30% of subjects receive a High HO designation, since all ten instructors shared the same self-perception that they were actually quite funny people.

The absence of questions pertaining to nonverbal humour mediums in the HOS (1991) instrument may have contributed to the non-High HO scores. Noting a construct validity problem with the HOS (1991), Wrench and Richmond (2004) state:

If we relied on the scale created by M. Booth-Butterfield and S. Booth-Butterfield (1991), great comedic figures like Charlie Chaplin or Mr. Bean would not be rated as highly humor oriented because they did not talk. Instead, these two men would score in the lower third of the scale simply because they used nonverbal behaviors to create humor-oriented messages (p.93).

Wrench and Richmond (2004) declared that, "Up to 93% of human communication can be nonverbal in orientation" (p.93). This aligns with Mehrabian's (1981) assertion that the majority of communication is implicit, and hidden in the silent messages (1971) of nonverbal language. Regarding the heavily verbal-focused nature of the instrument, Wrench and Richmond

(2004) say, “that while joke telling and humorous story telling are clearly important characteristics of communicated humor, to rely solely on them to determine if someone uses humor as a communicative tool discounts a great deal of the humorous communication that actually occurs” (p.93). Based on this, I did not rely heavily on the HOS (1991) to triangulate my data, instead relying more on my field notes, and post-interview reflections, to verify and substantiate my findings.

### **Results of the Study**

In the small talk occurring before the formal start of the interviews, many of the research participants expressed excitement and/or enthusiasm for the research topic, and communicated a genuine delight in being included in the study. Several of the instructors were of the opinion that, as an area of scholarly inquiry, humour in tertiary education has been grossly under-investigated. Once I was satisfied that each candidate met the study’s established eligibility requirements, the interviews got underway.

**Research question one:** What benefits do college instructors perceive in using humorous pedagogical tools in college classrooms?

#### **Theme 1: effective use of instructor humour enhances everyone’s experience.**

This theme emerged as central to many of the study participants’ classroom experiences. Instructors shared a general belief that everyone benefits when college teachers use humour effectively. Although this study focuses on instructors’ perceptions and experience of humour, the most powerful theme that emerged from the data was that enhancing the student experience through humour, is central to the instructor’s personal enjoyment of teaching. There was consensus that humour in teaching, when used appropriately, enhances the overall college teaching and learning experience for both students *and* instructors, in different ways. Citing specific psychological and social benefits to immersion in a humorous pedagogical climate, the

theme of student wellbeing and happiness and, by extension, instructor wellbeing and happiness, emerged, and re-emerged, countless times in the interviews. The majority of the instructors interviewed argued strongly in favour of using a warm, funny communication style as an entry point for enhancing student-teacher relations, and increasing student enjoyment. In support of the idea of a warm, affable communication style acting as a start for student-teacher relationships, Oberon said:

I think that the humour piece is an invitation. It's an invitation for them to *try*. I think that once they understand that this is an environment in which humour is allowed and encouraged, part of that is to encapsulate a willingness to be experimental. So I want them to be able to try it without the fear of getting the answer wrong, because that's really not what it's about.

Each of the research participants separately expressed a strong desire to create a positive, emotionally safe learning environment for students, and advocated strongly for the use of instructional humour in the classroom to either support, or ameliorate, student mental and emotional wellbeing. This theme contains two distinct, but related, sub-themes: (1) humour benefits student wellbeing, and, (2) humour enhances classroom climate. Although unique and distinct, each sub-theme seems contingent on the other in order to exist.

### **Humour benefits student wellbeing.**

I think it helps it helps bring down guards, and barriers, and nerves. A lot of the students are really nervous. They're scared shitless. Yeah – 90% of them are extremely anxious on the first day of class. And I can feel that nervousness, and I just know that if I use humour...I'll say something that will be funny, and that humour automatically releases a different kind of hormone. And they write journals..."I feel a lot more relaxed and comfortable now that I've had the first class, and I've met the professor, and they're not

scary, and I think I can do this”. So it relaxes people – lets people’s guards down so they can actually learn (*Hippolyta*).

There was agreement among all interview participants that, assuming the humour is used appropriately by the instructor, that the employment of a humorous teaching approach, especially when teaching challenging, edgy, or sensitive content, was of significant benefit to various aspects of student wellness. Titania, who teaches emergency communications to future EMS responders, admits her content can be cumbersome and/or emotionally triggering for some students, and consciously uses her natural sense of humour to lighten the delivery of sensitive content, so that students are able to maintain balance and focus in the classroom. She explained:

I would say the lightheartedness is all in the delivery. For instance, there’s one (video)...people usually cry after it...I try to make light of some of the things in the video, because that then can help perk people back up, who are all, “*I need a Kleenex!*” And then also, you know, bring it back to what we need to talk about – the protocols. So, yeah. It’s more in the delivery than the content, because the content we teach is, quite frankly, not conducive to humour.

Reverence for the idea of “lightness” is reflected in other study subjects’ classroom approaches, as well. Artemis claimed, “Education is not life or death...and I think we have to lighten up a little bit sometimes, and *enjoy the process* because that’s what learning is all about”. Similarly, Demetrius explained, “I can lighten the atmosphere by making them feel more comfortable in saying that I’m at ease...and it’s good. And you get the smile back from them, and there’s some respect there, as well”.

Many instructors rejected an overly serious approach to the educational process, citing numerous benefits to the use of instructor humour and student wellbeing. Table 3 presents the top 10 benefits most widely perceived by instructors as being of benefit to student wellbeing, and

the percentage of those who have directly observed, or had experience, with students enjoying those benefits.

Table 3

*Instructor-perceived Benefits of Using Humorous Pedagogical Tools and Student Wellbeing*

Specific Benefits to Student Wellbeing	Instructors Observed (by %)
1. Increased student engagement	100%
2. Stress/ tension diffusion or relief	100%
3. Makes instructor more relatable/approachable/human	90%
4. Enhances content learning and retention	90%
5. Lightens up tough/edgy/sensitive content	80%
6. Improves quality of in-class conversation/discussion	80%
7. Models humour approach used in professional practice	80%
8. Increases overall level of student comfort/ease	80%
9. Increases student self-esteem	70%
10. Decreases (-) energy, increases (+) energy	70%

The instructors identified humour as a significant tool for increasing student engagement, with many linking increased engagement to diminished symptoms of poor mental-emotional health, especially those presenting with fear, anxiety, or clinical depression. On the topic of student mental health, 70% of study participants noted some degree of student fragility in their narratives, regardless of age, program, or year of study. On the subject of students' receptiveness to humour, Peasblossom said, "I think about our students and their stress, and they have anxiety disorders, and depression, and it just, it just kind of 'generates'. I think all those reasons, (humour) – it's important". Linking mental wellness to class engagement, Puck said, "I'm going to have to loosen them up a bit with humour...people are more engaged when they're feeling more comfortable". This sentiment was echoed by another Titania, who argued that one

of the more dull classes she teaches is made more accessible and interesting to students through her use of humour:

I struggle to get \_\_\_\_\_ lecture engaged, because I find it as boring as wet snot. But when we're having a better time – having a good time, if you will, there's some laughter. Students are not only more willing to ask questions, but then also share personal experiences that contribute to the class discussions, so I think it just...opens things up a lot for them.

Actively seeking ways to deepen student engagement was credited by several instructors as having a direct, beneficial impact on student learning, and the retention of content. When asked what it would be like to teach his classes without humour, Puck responded, "It would be terrible. Yeah. I think I would be able to deliver the content, but I don't think I would get the engagement. And I think engagement and retention go hand in hand". Referring once again to her somewhat dry class on emergency communication protocols, Titania reflected:

And in part of the radio protocol, if you have a bad connection...the protocol, in order to improve the hearing, is to say words twice. So, I would say, "*to-to say-say words-words twice-twice*". So in the middle of my slides there's a slide that says, "Don't-don't worry-worry we-we are-are half-half way-way there-there, smiley face-smiley face" (*referring to emoticons*). All my students know what "words twice" is! So we're picking up the important stuff and trying to make it stick.

Ninety percent of study subjects acknowledged was the way in which humour serves to humanize a potentially intimidating college instructor, effectively "leveling the playing field" (*Oberon, Hippolyta*) between teacher and student. Oberon said, "Often, we can turn that humour towards our own foibles or situations. The observational piece that brings these things to the light of day...these silly human moments". He mentioned the importance of his using humour when

referring to his personal identity as an Indigenous LGBTQ+ man, arguing that a bit of levity acts as a reassuring platform on which students can stand and discuss their *own* identities, and their experiences with discrimination, social justice issues, and prejudice. He stated:

But when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues, *HELLS YES, SUGAR!* I'm the head of the classroom! (*shared laughter*). There is going to be *some funny* about that, right? About their perceptions and about their stereotypical thoughts about what "*this*" means, and what "*this*" looks like. Likewise with race...as someone who's half First Nations, I have an unusual perspective that I bring to bear on this. So I absolutely *DO* bring that into the classroom.

Similarly, when asked about the effects of humour on student-instructor dynamics, Hippolyta sighed and smiled, and described her idea of how humour allows her to establish a comfortable student-teacher paradigm in her classroom: "We're people, talking to people". The importance of breaking down power dynamics between students and teachers was underscored in the words of Thisbe:

I found (humour) was sort of a universal connector, and took away a lot of the power differentials. When I started teaching part-time...it seemed to work. And I enjoyed it. Again, I want to break down the power dynamics. I want to have people at ease.

**Humour enhances classroom climate.**

While the interview narratives focused strongly on the emotional and psychological benefits available to students through an instructor's use of humour, there was also a significant, shared perception among participants that using humour appropriately, and positively, in classroom teaching significantly expedites the creation of a more enjoyable, relaxed learning climate. Five core benefits were identified in 80-100% of participant interviews. Findings are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Instructor-perceived Core Benefits of Using Humorous Pedagogical Tools to Enhance Classroom Climate*

Enhanced Classroom Climate: Perceived Core Benefits	Mentioned by (%) of Instructors
1. Creates overall environment conducive to learning	100%
2. Helps bond/forgo peer-to-peer relationships	80%
3. Permits student self-expression and authenticity	80%
4. Enhances soft skills competence ( <i>i.e.</i> ; <i>communication, compassion, empathy, active listening, inclusion, optimism, problem-solving, creativity</i> )	80%
5. Builds community	80%

Furthering the idea that humour enhances the classroom atmosphere, and contributes to greater student enjoyment, Oberon felt that enjoyment, engagement, and the creation of a positive classroom climate, worked together both collaboratively, and interdependently:

What they *do* feedback is more *engagement*. And a more relaxed timbre where there's less rigidity in that space. And it becomes a much more comfortable space to be in. So I think that what *I* get back from it is the timbre and the culture of the classroom.

Humour was also said to have the ability to “change the energy” (*Peasblossom*) of a learning space, and can be counted on to “flip the negativity” (*Artemis*) when things become emotionally charged. Others mentioned that a more cohesive, less awkward classroom environment contributed to good student attendance. For example, Puck stated:

I have students that come in, and their looking forward to my next class, and then I talk to my colleagues, and they're like, *Oh, I only had half the students show up*. But I've never



had more than one or two students miss for legitimate reasons. So I think that is because of that environment we create.

A relaxed classroom was idealized by Demetrius, who regularly uses the therapeutic, healing properties of humour to reinforce the development of soft skills in his nursing students. He spoke highly of humour:

So...it's a *bridge*. It's a *lubricant*. It's something that allows you to lighten a situation, it allows you to relate the realities of life – and we know how intense they are these days – to the fact that we're all human, and good things and bad things happen...it's what you do with it, and how you interpret these things. And humour helps us to interpret things, in many cases, on a much more relaxed level.

Other subjects referred to the value of a relaxed, “laid-back” (*Thisbe, Hippolyta*) learning environment as well, pointing out that the most fertile learning environments are those in which students are able to express themselves without fear of belittlement, or ridicule. Furthering the metaphor of humour as a bridge, several subjects alluded to fun and laughter in the college classroom as a “connector” (*Thisbe, Peasblossom, Hippolyta, Lysander*) between themselves and their students, the students and their peers, and the students and the larger college classroom.

Finally, on the subject of humour cultivating a welcoming, supportive learning climate, there was a shared belief among subjects that the best instructors are those who consciously create a light-hearted, emotionally safe classroom, while acknowledging and promoting student diversity. The instructor narratives collectively pointed to a shared fundamental belief that, whether a humorous pedagogical approach was used or not, an instructor's sincere desire to help students learn should undergird any type of teaching approach.

Many interviewees shared the common belief that an instructor's use of humour entices students to come to class because its use signals the extension of an invitation for the students to

be themselves. The instructors were largely in agreement a student's emotional state improved, and that fear declined, when they rejected the traditional, "straitlaced" (*Thisbe, Demetrius, Puck*) professorial teaching persona, in favour of a more affable, comfortable teaching approach.

Artemis was passionate about the power of humour to dissolve walls between teachers and students, saying, "I know students where the teacher is "THE TEACHER", and you are "THE STUDENT". And so I think (humour) allows us to sort of break down some of that boundary".

**Research question two:** How do college instructors use humour to create higher levels of student-teacher immediacy?

**Theme 2: student-teacher immediacy is increased through differing communication channels and humour vehicles.**

The interview data indicated that 90% of instructors directly credited the use of humour with fostering higher levels of emotional connection and relationship with their students. When asked to list and describe specific ways in which humour was manifest in their teaching practices, the instructor responses were varied, and, in some instances, inconsistent, or even conflicted. All instructors admitted to using *some* form of humour in their pedagogical practice, however the data showed that not all forms of humour are used equally, or at all, by all instructors.

***Sub-theme: Instructors have uniquely diverse approaches in their operationalization of humour.***

The instructors' technical operationalization of humour fell neatly into two distinct channel classifications: (1) verbal, and, (2) nonverbal. When subjects were asked about body language, and whether they considered it relevant to teaching, they affirmed that although the majority of their interactions with students were verbal, (lecturing, discussion, or student-teacher conversation, for example), almost all were accompanied by some form of nonverbal

communication, as well. One subject was particularly aware (and enthusiastic) in his use of the nonverbal channel. As I asked Oberon about the various ways in which he communicated humour, his passion was apparent before I had finished the question:

**Allison:** Do you use facial expressions, or any non-verbal...

**Oberon:** (*cuts Allison off, yelling*) **GOOD. LORD. YES!** I am dressed as a flamingo (*referring to his bright pink outfit*) because this is pretty much how I flap around my classroom. Absolutely! If I can draw their attention in whatever way necessary, I do.

Titania explained, “There’s usually some body-language humour, and often it’s self-deprecating, because of my delivery...So! If there’s a topic that I’m passionate about, then my entire body gets into it”. Each instructor had differing degrees of usage in both the verbal and nonverbal domains. Data from the Humor Orientation Survey revealed that although verbal interactions were clearly the dominant mode of transmission, 40% of subjects either equaled, or surpassed, their use of the verbal communication channel in favour of nonverbal communication channels. Findings are presented in Figure 3.

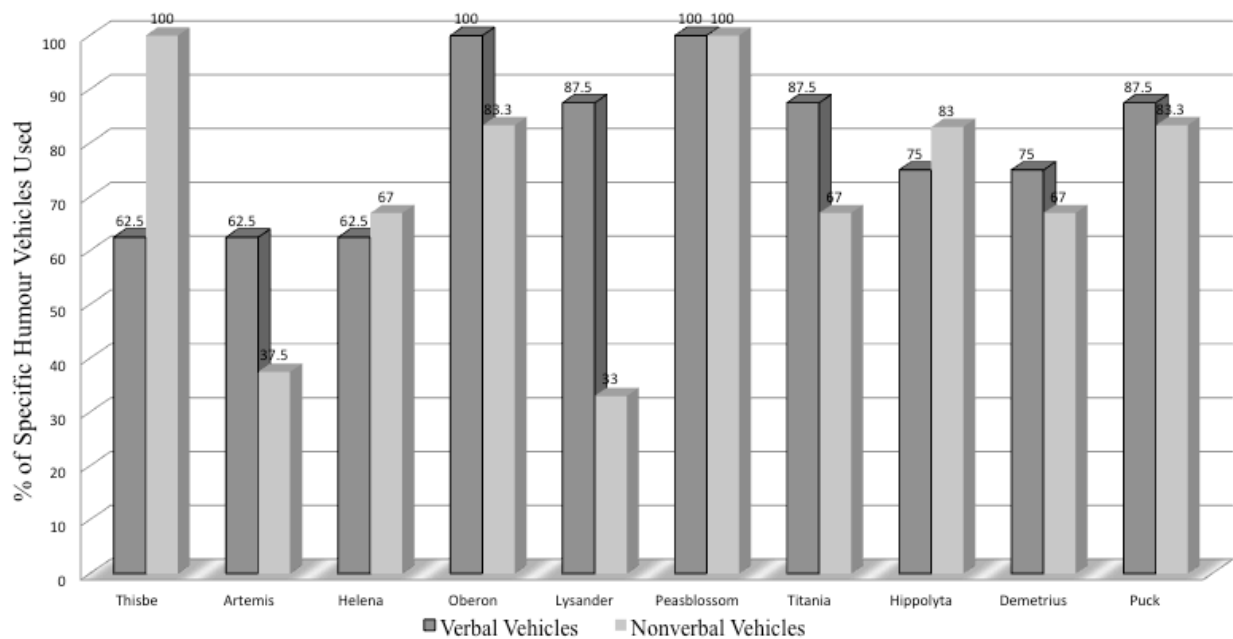


Figure 3. Verbal and nonverbal humour vehicle usage by instructor

Within the verbal and nonverbal channels, 14 more distinct humour delivery sub-channels, or vehicles, emerged: eight verbal, six nonverbal. Each reflects a specific, separate humour tool used by instructors in college classrooms. These are presented in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Verbal and Nonverbal Channels and Humour Vehicles*

Verbal Channels (8)	Nonverbal Channels (6)
1. Conversation	1. Facial Expressions & Gesticulations
2. Dark/Black Humour	2. Static Visual Media ( <i>Memes, GIFs, Photos, Images, LMS, Comics, Powerpoint Slides</i> )
3. General Wit ( <i>lecturing</i> )	3. Music/Dance
4. Inappropriate Humour/Teasing	4. Games, Play, Physicality, Physical Humour
5. Sarcasm	5. Test/Exam ( <i>Written</i> )
6. Self-deprecating Humour	6. Dynamic Media ( <i>YouTube, Videos, TV, Film</i> )
7. Shock Humour	
8. Storytelling	

In acknowledgement of the myriad learning styles and preferences that exist within the student body, two instructors explained that their intentional use of employing multiple humour styles, makes content more appealing and accessible to diverse classroom populations. In her acknowledgement of using humour to appeal to learning differences, Thisbe commented, “I think it’s also been my way of being able to communicate to all different levels of learners, all different learning styles”. Similarly, Peasblossom explained that by consciously varying her

humour approaches, she successfully addressed not only different student learning styles, but also those presenting with learning disabilities:

And so I'll bring in some goofy toilet humour, or whatever. And that seems to work for some people. Definitely videos. So, every once in a while, mid-term, whatever, I'll just show a random video. Or we'll start off with something funny. When I know students well enough, I'll tease them gently, and only the ones I know that can take it, and I'll check in with them afterwards. So that, cartoons, stories, videos, music...".

After categorizing the humour vehicles, I charted their use by interview subject. The chart shows that humour transmission methods in the verbal domain were the most heavily used among the instructors. All 10 instructors used in-class the conversation, general wit (in lecturing), and storytelling vehicles. This was, however, hardly surprising, given that each of the instructors teach in exclusively face-to-face learning environments. The lesser-used types of humour in the verbal domain included dark/black humour (30%), and shock humour (30%).

The interviews revealed that the use of humour vehicles varied widely from instructor to instructor, in their practice of teaching. In the nonverbal domain, for example, 100% of research participants reported using facial expressions and/or physical gestures in their teaching as a means of conveying amusement, or embellishing stories. Dynamic media, (YouTube videos, other forms of video, television, or film clips), was heavily used as well, and each instructor confirmed his/her incorporation of at least one or more distinct dynamic media vehicles in their teaching. Static media, (GIFs, memes, photos, cartoons, and images), were used pedagogically by 70% of research participants, and slightly fewer instructors included humour on tests, quizzes or exams (60%). The interviews confirmed that music and/or dance was utilized as a teaching tool by only one instructor.

Concurrent use of multiple verbal and nonverbal humour vehicles was commonly reported among research participants. Puck, an instructor with the Paramedic program, described how his deliberate use of multiple humour vehicles across domains helped alleviate the inevitable tensions and emotions experienced by students studying paramedicine:

One of my standbys with a new group, "Let's do 2-minute debate: Is a hot dog a sandwich, or not?" (*Allison laughs*). So those sorts of things, right, and I have a few, like, in my back pocket that I pull out if I need to...And the other thing I find too, is like, it doesn't matter what age they are, people like to be a kid again. So, I always bring candy or stickers. I have stickers in my bag. So, I'll bring those out, and make people have to earn them, and stuff like that. Small contests, or something like that.

Peasblossom voiced her enjoyment of making her students laugh as a means of diffusing tension. She claimed that she often uses written humour in her tests and exams, and will even joke around verbally during a test, in order to relax the students:

Tests? Definitely! So, in tests I always embed a few goofy questions... And very often I'll see students laugh during a test, and they'll look up, and they'll just shake their head in a positive way. I'll say, and it's so obviously not the end of the test, but I'll say, "Alrighty, you have five minutes to finish up". And students look up in a panic, and I'll say, '*J.K!*' (*grins*).

Helena admitted blending verbal humour into her lectures with nonverbal mediums, like static media and facial expressions, indicating her strong predilection for visual humour:

**Helena:** I use it in my in my lectures. And I also incorporate memes, GIFs, videos, movie clips, in my courses.

**Allison:** And what about the nonverbal humour? Do you use facial expressions, or any other kind of nonverbal humour?

**Helena:** I do. Yeah, I do. Quite often.

An overall breakdown of specific humour types, or vehicles, used by the study participants is presented in Table 6.

Table 6

*Specific Humour Vehicle Use by Subject (%)*

Verbal Humour Type	Subject										Overall use (%)
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Conversational	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
Dark/Black					✓	✓	✓				30%
General Wit	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
Inappropriate/Teasing				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	70%
Sarcasm	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	90%
Self-deprecating	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
Shock				✓		✓				✓	30%
Storytelling	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
Nonverbal Humour Type											
Facial Exp. & Gestures	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%
Static Media	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	70%
Music/Dance						✓					10%
Games/Play/Physical	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	90%
Humour											
Test/Exam	✓			✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	60%
Dynamic Media	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100%

Note: 1=Thisbe, 2=Artemis, 3=Helena, 4=Oberon, 5=Lysander, 6=Peasblossom, 7=Titania, 8=Hippolyta, 9=Demetrius, 10=Puck.

Although Table 6 can be considered technically accurate, it presents an incomplete picture of instructor humour use. For example, while it is correct to include both research subjects Puck

and Artemis in the 90% of instructors who use Games, Play, or Physical Humour in their pedagogy, Puck admitted being a frequent user, and Artemis highly infrequent. Puck said:

I'll pull out a plastic snake, and throw it at somebody. Or, if people are falling asleep, I'll throw a Nerf ball at them. I would like to have a water gun but apparently...there's a fine line...I just have to kind of do something physical, like get up and go!

Artemis explained her use of the physical humour vehicle as a singular event, occurring just once per term:

So the one activity I do every semester...I ask the students to follow me, and to do what I do. So, I stand up, and they stand up. And then I laugh hysterically. And I cross my legs as if I'm peeing my pants, because that's exactly what would happen, and I snort, and I laugh, and then I just stop. And we all sit down. That's the activity I do. And it's hilarious. And it's fun, and I feel better, they feel better (*laughs, snorts*). It's hilarious. And so the students all relate to me, and I think there's a there's a shift in the culture after that.

So although Puck and Artemis both use physical humour in their teaching, the dissimilarity in these subjects' frequency of its use can hardly be valued as equal. Thus, Table 6 provides a somewhat distorted representation of the data.

As the participants in this study teach exclusively in face-to-face educational settings, this guaranteed the inevitability of at least some degree of verbal, and nonverbal, communication channel use. Each study participant acknowledged using multiple verbal and nonverbal channels variably, and with differing frequency, in their daily teaching practice. The instructors reported that the process of deciding just which humour vehicle to use was largely based on the vehicle's suitability to, (a) the instructor's student audience, (b) the nature of the specific content being



taught, and, (c) the degree of influence the instructor's personal teaching philosophy had on delivery.

I decided to represent the data in a different way. In order to get a more precise sense of the instructor's humour habits and transmission preferences, I gauged the *frequency* of the subjects' claim to using of each humour vehicle, according to assertions made in their interview narratives. A Likert-type scale: A=Always, O=Often, S=Sometimes, R=Rarely, and, N=Never was applied to the interview data, and recorded. Table 7 offers a significantly more accurate, complete picture of instructor humour use.

Table 7

*Weight/Magnitude of Humour Type Use by Participant*

(A=Always, O=Often, S=Sometimes, R=Rarely, N=Never)

Verbal Humour Type	Participant									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Conversational	A	S	O	S	O	A	S	O	S	A
Dark/Black	N	N	N	N	O	S	O	N	N	N
General Wit	A	O	O	A	O	A	S	O	S	A
Inappropriate/Teasing	N	N	N	S	O	O	S	S	S	O
Sarcasm	S	A	A	S	N	S	A	O	S	A
Self-deprecating	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	S	S
Shock	N	N	N	S	N	R	N	N	N	A
Storytelling	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Nonverbal Humour Type										
Facial Exp. & Gestures	A	O	O	A	S	A	A	S	S	A
Static Media	R	N	A	S	N	O	N	O	N	A
Music/Dance	N	N	N	N	N	R	N	N	N	N
Games/Play/Physical Humour	R	O	S	A	N	S	A	R	O	A
Test/Exam	A	N	N	S	N	S	No data	S	S	S
Dynamic Media	O	O	A	S	R	A	S	S	S	O

Note: 1=Thisbe, 2=Artemis, 3=Helena, 4=Oberon, 5=Lysander, 6=Peasblossom, 7=Titania, 8=Hippolyta, 9=Demetrius, 10=Puck.

**Theme 3: humour humanizes instructors and increases their relatability.**

The words, “authentic”, “relatable”, and “real”, showed up in 90% of the interview transcripts on questions pertaining to the humanization of the student-teacher relationship. Instructors assigned significant importance to “being yourself” when working with college students. In the teacher-student dynamic, Hippolyta explained the benefits of authenticity:

When you are yourself, the students can be themselves. And then you can get a real sense of how to help them learn, because you understand who they are as people. And like, students who are not as anxious, and feel more comfortable and relaxed around you, are more likely to come and ask you questions. Are more likely to come to you for advice.

Interview subjects agreed that a student’s academic and emotional enjoyment of their class, even their larger program, was largely contingent on their ability to relate to the humanness of their teachers. Furthering this theme, the words “human” and “humanize” presented frequently in multiple interview narratives. In the words of Demetrius:

I think they like to know there’s a real person under all that. That is important. And at the same time, though, “Yes, I’m a real person, I make mistakes like you”, but then the extra little hit is, “...but I don’t make as many as you” (*shared laughter*). That’s why I’m here, and you’re over there (*laughs*). It’s the human factor. It really is.

The instructors universally agreed that students respected and appreciated them more when they showed their “realness” as people through their teaching. Many of the interview narratives affirmed the importance of the instructors sharing humorous personal anecdotes about their spouses, partners and/or children, and said that joking about failed relationships, sharing stories of personal hardship, or loss, or just sharing some laughs about what everybody did over the weekend, facilitated the development of closer, more trusting, student-teacher relationships. On this topic, the interview participants again voiced their collective dislike of the “suit and tie”,

iconic professorial college teacher image. There was a general sentiment among instructors that the presentation of a haughty, non-humorous teaching persona in higher education created a barrier in the formation of healthy, enjoyable student-teacher relationships.

On the topic of humour and its humanizing effect on interpersonal dynamics, Helena said, “I think it creates a relationship with the students that makes me approachable, and makes me real, which I think is really an important aspect of teaching”. To humanize herself, Helena admitted to regularly engaging in gentle, self-deprecating humour, providing her students ample opportunity to laugh with her, or even at her, through the sharing of her funny mistakes, slipups, and professional missteps.

**Instructors use humour approaches that mirror those found in their respective vocational work environments.** Referring to her work with Early Childhood Leadership students, Hippolyta stated the importance of modeling the organizational human relations paradigms and worldviews students can expect to experience in the field of ECE:

I see our field as a unique opportunity to kind of shape our society. If teachers and educators are working with young minds, and getting them to see the world in a particular way, that’s pretty powerful. So I want students to walk away from my classroom and our program, recognizing that personal connections, and doing the things that you love, are things that matter, and are going to matter in your life.

The power of humour in building bridges between classroom and work was echoed by Lysander, who said:

If I see people that I think have a great sense of humour in my class, number one, I think, “WOW, they are going to do great in our field”. I’ve got this apprentice now, she’s hilarious. Over the top hilarious. And right away, I’m thinking, she’s just going to do great in our field.

Artemis, an Early Childhood Education instructor, linked the inclusion of humour and play in college classrooms into the building professional, relationship-based paradigms. She underscored the importance of role modeling and engaging in play with her students, in order that they will, in turn, learn how to generate trusting relationships with children and families. Adamant that those kinds of connections begin in the college classroom, she said, “We're lucky enough to be in a profession where we are instilling play, so we should be able to feel that play in the classroom, as well. And so I think that idea of “play” can sometimes translate to humour”. Similarly, Hippolyta said:

The part that I love about my job is that feeling you get in a classroom when you've connected with your students...I want the students to feel that, too, so they know that it's relationships that they want to form with their own young people that they're going to be working with, or the families they're going to be working with.

A different kind of humour entirely, yet still very much linked to professional practice, was dark/black humour. One instructor declared that sharing dark humour with his students, both as a personal delivery vehicle for edgy or sensitive content, and as a piece of stand-alone piece of curriculum was justified, given how ubiquitous it is in the field of Developmental Services. I was informed by two separate instructors from the DSW program, and two instructors from the School of Public Safety, that the use of dark humour is widely regarded in these fields as both normal and healthy, and that engaging in dark humour is a common way for professionals to cope with the challenges associated with their work. Given its omnipresence in the field, Lysander defended the use of dark humour in his teaching, explaining:

As a professional...we talk about stress and adjustment disorders, one of the things we talk about is the use of humour as a stress relief. And I teach first semester students and I talk about dark humour in our field, and they kind of don't seem to really get what I'm

talking about. But then I talk to apprentices...They're working in the field, and I say, you know, "*When we laugh at work when we really shouldn't be laughing...*" And they all put their hands to their mouths, and think of a situation, and they get it right away. Yeah, we do that all the time. So I think that outside of the classroom, I think that's what we do out there *a lot*. It's just a way of coping with things.

In summary, the study participants universally suggested that it is important to not only discuss, but also *model* the humour approaches that students are likely to find when entering their respective fields as new professionals. They agreed emphatically that modeling certain humour approaches in the classroom serves to better prepare students for the realities of the chosen vocation, once in the field. Each instructor's personal use of a specific type of humour, and/or endorsement for certain humour types and not others, seemed largely dependent on the vocation in which they were teaching. Regardless of the field or vocation, however, there was a common view that humour should be considered a core competency, an essential employability skill, and should therefore be modeled by more college instructors.

**Immediacy is fostered through illustrative storytelling.**

I know that it is, for me, very important to have a connection with students. And I do think that being able to have the opportunity for storytelling, and to tell jokes, opens them up *to give back*. And I'm always learning from them. And I think that, for me, is the part that sharing that kind of humour and storytelling allows for...I'm a huge storyteller. I believe that people learn better through stories, and I believe I teach better through storytelling. And humour keeps the interest going in the story (*Thisbe*).

Participants indicated that storytelling, above all other forms of humour transmission vehicles, was the most enjoyable and easy way to bring humour into the college classroom. Storytelling was touted by the majority of subjects as the preferred method of sharing levity with

students, finding it both terrifically easy, and natural, to employ. It was agreed that personal stories, especially funny ones, illustrating an instructor's professional experiences from the field of study, add dimension and tangibility to material that might otherwise seem to students overly complicated, triggering, or abstract. The following responses are from instructors who were particularly enthused about storytelling:

I believe that we connect through telling stories, so you will know more about me, and understand more about my life if I tell you an experience. And so, I have found that works! Like...students will comment in the feedback that, "*L---- is one of those teachers that makes connections with students, and you will remember her*". I feel like that's probably because of the stories that we share, I think when we know each other.

*(Hippolyta)*

So my first five minutes is often me storytelling about something – either my adolescent son, or something that happened to me today, or over the weekend, or whatever...Now that I say that, I think that perhaps that's also a connector, in that *they get there*. They get to hear that piece before we get rolling. I think that being able to...it's important for me to have them see me as human, as a person, as fallible, but also fun at the same time. Because I hope it helps them to stay connected *(Thisbe)*.

And we'll be talking about science, I will say, "You know, it's funny that that came up, because you know what? There was a situation where..." and everyone will sit up, and start listening, and say, "*Oh good – we're having a story!*" *(laughs)*. And its like, oh wait, this is related to what we were doing! *(laughs)*. And so yeah, absolutely. Stories are great. And stories with a little bit of a humorous twist are even better *(Demetrius)*.

Not surprisingly, the research participants wove a lot of stories into their interviews about the practice of storytelling in their teaching environments. There was agreement that the best stories to share with students were those that highlighted the instructors' funny mistakes, errors, and failures, from both their professional lives, as well as, to varying degrees, their personal lives. The instructors regarded the telling of humorous stories as an invaluable tool for breathing life into otherwise dull content, and explained that when teaching sensitive subjects, like trauma protocols, crisis response, human sexuality, or potentially triggering topics such as suicide, sexual paraphilia, or emergency communications, stories, especially the lighter ones, were always well received by students. Many of the respondents emphasized the ease with which they were able to use humorous, personal storytelling as a means of sharing both essential teachable moments, and cautionary tales, from their respective vocations.

There's lots of storytelling in paramedics. I can tell about mistakes I made, and learning from mistakes. Trying to have a humorous slant to it. Most of the time they are funny, and I encourage people to laugh at me. And then, all the case studies...we try and have a humorous slant. Everything I say is sort of trying to just keep it light (*Puck*).

In our discussions on storytelling, every instructor, without exception, shared a handful of amusing personal anecdotes from their teaching experience with me. Sharing *their* stories, some in vivid detail, helped rationalize the effectiveness and impact of humorous storytelling on students. Peasblossom laughed when she recounted a time in which she was seized by an uncontrollable (and contagious), case of the giggles while trying to share a story with her class:

So I'm trying to deliver my story, and I'd stop. And I'd be like (!!!) And then I'd start again – and I'd start laughing again! And the *students...!* Well. The whole class is howling because I'm laughing so hard, I can't even deliver my story because I got the

giggles. I think that the story was probably a huge letdown at the end...but *everybody* in the classroom got the giggles. So that was completely unintentional, but it was actually kind of neat because we just all had a...they're laughing at me, I'm laughing about my story, the story sucked, (*Allison laughs*) but it was great. It was just kind of, "Oh – *never mind that story!* Here's my point that I'm trying to make!" And it was just a really neat moment. It was fun! (*Peasblossom*).

There was a shared belief among interview participants that instructors who teach and illustrate content through the sharing of humorous stories had greater impact on the students than those instructors who do not. Thisbe said:

If I couldn't story-tell, which is part of my humour, I probably would not be able to explain things in a way that people understand. I think that is my big strength, in that I am much better at describing and explaining things through story, than any other method.

**Theme 4: the wrong kind of humour will negatively impact immediacy.**

Just as much time was spent in the interviews discussing when humour should *not* be used in pedagogy, as when it should. There was general agreement among the instructors that *any* kind of humour in the classroom involved a certain degree of risk, and that a teacher's decision to utilize a humorous approach must mitigate that risk by being sensitive to time and place. Although exceptions were acknowledged, all participants agreed that careless, glib humour, especially pertaining to race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, sexual or domestic violence, crimes against children, death, dying, or suicide, should be expressly avoided. The same caution was issued for forced humour, or any humour that could be construed by students as crass, crude, or cruel. Humour, for all its potentially positive effects on student-teacher relations, can also be divisive and damaging. Oberon agreed that choosing the time and place for humour was a delicate matter, and shared his perspective on its use:



I'm one of those folks that think that all humour is inherently negative. I think that it really just depends on who you are making fun of...I think that anybody that uses humour is probably using it as a defense mechanism, frankly.

Where some instructors were adamant about avoiding certain humour vehicles, others freely admitted using these regularly, even claiming them as their default, or “go-to” humour methodology. Especially strong cautions were issued around the use of teasing and sarcasm, with an avoidance rationale based on the risk of them being misconstrued, or misinterpreted. Thisbe said, “Sarcasm you’ve got to be very careful with, right? Because it can definitely either be taken the wrong way, or be totally inappropriate. So I do not (*emphatic, taps table*) use sarcasm towards students”. Thisbe goes on to say:

Plus you gotta also remember that you need to practice what you preach. And so it's one of those things where I would say that I wouldn't want them to do that (act sarcastic) with people that are potentially vulnerable. I'm also always aware of the privilege and power that I hold, and therefore recognize that that also can lend itself to people perceiving or experiencing that in a way that isn't good, or isn't healthy.

In contrast, Puck stated, “...I *do use* sarcasm. A LOT. I kind of break the rules, in that I'll say, “Hey – I'll call on you from time to time and have some fun, but if it ever goes out of hand, let me know!” One instructor pointed out that she consciously tones down her naturally sarcastic sense of humour, especially when teaching her international students:

I consider myself to be fairly sarcastic, and when I read about sarcasm, that's supposedly the lowest form of humour. So I'm very aware of my sarcasm, particularly with our population of students, because not everybody gets the sarcasm...I know we have a lot of students from India and China where, you know, the perception of who we are as professionals is very different. So I think sarcasm is probably not smart (*Artemis*).

On sarcasm, other research participants acknowledged that language and cultural barriers create obstacles to understanding it, as well. Puck admitted infusing his teaching with a lot of playful sarcasm, and said, “The only time it really went sideways for me, I was trying to use sarcasm through an interpreter in Hong Kong. And that doesn't translate well. So, that didn't go very well at all!” In addressing the increasingly international student presence in classrooms at Aspen College, Artemis said, “I think there's lots of humour that's really *not* humour, it's you know, racist, sexist...And so I'm very sensitive to that, because we do have women and men from all over the world that come into our classrooms”. This was illustrated in a story told by Peasblossom:

So I have a health class, and half of our students are International students from India. A big chunk of them are nurses. There is one student in particular...And he's a really smart guy, but he spouts off all “nurse-y” words to answer questions. And he has a pretty thick accent. And his answer was right. It was about kidneys. And it came out of my mouth before I even caught myself saying it, and I said, “Okay, in English please!” And that would have been a mildly humorous way to say, “*For the rest of us lower plebes who don't have this training, can you translate?*” So. That was completely inappropriate! And as soon as that was out of my mouth, I thought, “Holy shit, that was bad”.

On the subject of teasing, a practice categorically condemned by the majority of research participants, Lysander was heartily in favour. “Part of my humour is teasing. Actually, a large part is teasing!” He told a story about a student he knew who vomited during another instructor's exam. Upon seeing that student, he grinned and said, “So -----, - I heard ya' *puked!*” Lysander went on to explain, “So *that's* the kind of teasing. But I mean, you have to be careful in general with teasing, especially with students. But...I know him, I've taught him, so I knew he'd be OK with it”. Where Lysander pointed out the playfulness and situational context

of teasing students, Demetrius viewed things differently. He said, “I don’t find a lot of humour in picking on things that make people feel uncomfortable. I don’t find a lot of humour...there’s the German expression, ‘*schadenfreude*’ – shameful joy...”. Demetrius explained *schadenfreude* in reference to how he conducts his classes - where he might adopt a playful, almost cheeky, attitude towards those students who are overly vocal or challenging towards him, he takes no pleasure in centering those students out, or belittling them. Respect, he says, is paramount. Other instructors emphasized the importance of respect, with Helena saying she never uses any kind of humour, “...that will be disrespectful or marginalizing to any of the populations that we have in our classes, or to work with, or in society in general”. Several instructors vehemently defended their use of sarcasm and gentle teasing, stating that these tools, when used judiciously, and mindfully, can be highly effective in pulling outliers/ non-engaged students into the fun of a running joke, or shared classroom moment.

All instructors agreed that making jokes about certain topics, or academic subjects, was taboo. However, the interview data revealed that those taboo topics and subjects varied widely from instructor to instructor. Oberon said, “I don’t know that I can categorize a hard and fast rule for humour...because I think that contextually, *contextually*, we should be able to find humour appropriately in a lot of things”. He then said:

I think there are certain issues that I will skirt around for sure. Anything about sexual violence of course, I don’t think that’s even remotely funny. Or particular issues about domestic violence, or any issues involving maltreatment of children. There’s no room for funny in some of those areas.

Making fun of specific populations or groups was also widely discouraged and condemned by most participants. The instructors shared a keen awareness of being watched by the students, and noted their responsibility for role-modeling the desired human relations

behaviours unique to their respective vocations. Each instructor articulated personal boundaries about what s/he would, or would not, make light of with students. Some instructors, for example, stated they would never joke about something as serious as death or dying, where others said that it was those very subjects that needed to be de-stigmatized through a less serious approach. “If we’re talking about something, for instance, suicide, there are moments where some levity – I don’t want to call it humour – but lightness, *can* be injected” (*Titania*).

**Instructors must know their audience, and the “fine line”.**

A teacher - a person - using (humour) has to be aware of who the audience is. Not to go over the line. So that's the only thing. I mean, I think if you're going to use humour, you have to be very observant. If I'm offending people, or people aren't thinking this is particularly funny...people aren't laughing, or people are upset, I went too far (*Lysander*).

When the instructors were asked about when it was appropriate to use humour, and how they went about deciding on the mode of humour delivery (jokes, videos, stories), many subjects referenced a “fine line”, the importance of “not crossing the line”, and “boundaries”. There was agreement that a college instructor’s ability to accurately read a student audience is an essential skill; an absolute requirement for any teacher planning to use humour in a college classroom. “I mean, you have to always know your audience, right?...the *audience* has to be there for what kind of humour you use, you know what I mean?” (*Puck*). The idea that humour delivery methods should be adaptable, relative to student audience, was wholly supported by Demetrius, who said:

It can be a fine line. Of course it can...It also depends on the group. And humour...it changes. The humour, I guess, that I'd incorporate into a classroom changes, depending on how long I've known the group, and how I'm related to the group.

He continues,

There's things I wouldn't say in a pre-health class of students who are there for the first time, and they're nervous about being at college...Completely different from a group of third year respiratory therapy students who have known me for a couple of years.

Knowing “the fine line”, and when not to cross it, is crucially important to Thisbe. When asked about her personal boundaries pertaining to the inclusion of humour in her day-to-day teaching practice, she said:

*So you have to know the line.* You have to know the line of being able to have humour, but at the same time, getting the content across, being able to express to them the importance of the information, and get them to understand that the humour is part of the *teaching process*, and not necessarily part of that content.

Study participants felt it was essential that, prior to any joking around with students in a classroom setting, it was imperative that the instructors *observe* the students, actively scanning for mood, emotional temperature, and those who may appear prone to emotional triggers. Additionally, any instructor using wit that is particularly irreverent, dark, or outlandish, must be prepared to “back it up” pedagogically. Titania explained that she carefully considers student readiness before sharing one particularly dark bit of humour with her class of future emergency responders; a nursery-rhyme type song about the awfulness of receiving a 9-1-1 call reporting a death, first thing in the morning. Titania explained to me that a “VSA”, means vital signs absent. She then sang the cheery little ditty: “*Start your day with a VSA, VSA, VSA! Start your day with a VSA...*” A perfect example of dark humour, Titania explained that this type of facetiousness is fun, but that it also has a time and place, and emphasized the importance of reading her student audience to know whether they can handle the VSA song. Titania is sensitive to the fine line:

It's about limits. You should never make a comment, funny or unfunny, that you're not comfortable backing up. If I can support what I've said, even though I've made light...If I

can turn around and support it, now it's evident that I'm making light of it, because I know it's a serious subject, and, for some of you, it might be a little too personal. And I recognize that. But for other people, that aren't able to engage, they need to have some other piece to identify with. The *levity* being what they're identifying with.

Several instructors expressed a belief that college teachers, either lacking experience with content, and/or keen observational skills, are in danger of betraying students' trust in them. They alluded to the tenuous, fragile, changeable nature of the student-teacher relationship, and concluded unanimously that the misuse of humour can cause irreparable damage to that relationship.

There was a clear correlation in the data between the degree to which humour was used, and, a) each instructor's professional experience in the vocational field of study, and, b) years of teaching experience. Clear relationships between these variables emerged in the interview data after the secondary coding process was complete. It became apparent that the more extensive an instructor's professional experience in the vocational field of study, and/or teaching experience, the higher their use of "riskier" humour approaches, like sarcasm, dark humour, or physical humour. Additionally, it was apparent that the deeper an instructor's degree of experience in presenting edgy, sensitive content, the higher the call for a lighter, more humorous pedagogical approach in sharing that content. Lysander, for example, a veteran college instructor with 30 years full- and part-time teaching experience, plus extensive professional experience in counselling, said:

I think, for me, it comes with probably the longer I was here, the more I did it, (*used humour in teaching*) just because I'm getting more comfortable myself. I mean, the way I started out was my having to look at my notes, and be worried about content, and 30

years later, you know, no notes.... And so it just comes with a more relaxed, confident experience.

Lysander continued:

So I teach sexual paraphilia in mental health. Which is anything from pedophilia, to, you know, transgender dildos. And that whole range, type of thing. And the way we do it is a very light approach...like I do exercises, and there they are fun/humorous. We make them humorous. Not the pedophilia stuff, but all the other stuff in between.

Similarly, Demetrius, a college instructor of 14 years, approaches sensitive, or suggestive content with fun, leveraging his years of teaching experience and personal comfort levels with the material when teaching his nursing students:

To address human sexuality and sexual reproduction...These are things that BEG for humour! Not because you're trying to diminish it, the exact opposite. You're trying to say, "This is a very important thing. So it's fine if we're humorous right now, and it makes you comfortable. BUT. You have to remember how serious this is". ...I love teaching human sexuality, sexual relations, human anatomy, because I want to make it approachable.

Demetrius continues:

But if (the students) are thinking, "*He's comfortable with his material. He understands his stuff, and feels so comfortable enough with this stuff, that he can talk about it in a humorous way*". I think that builds a lot of confidence with students.

After some discussion regarding the relationship between Lysander's and Demetrius' considerable teaching experience, and each instructor's relative comfort using humorous pedagogical approaches, I was left with the distinct impression that less experienced college instructors might not be as comfortable using humour, if faced with teaching that same content.

**Research question three:** In what ways does using humour in teaching affect college instructors' teaching enjoyment?

**Theme 5: teaching enjoyment is linked to an instructor's perceived academic and philosophical freedoms.**

I do very much value that I am allowed to teach in the manner that is comfortable for me. That's a big deal. If I worked in an environment that said no, no, no...sorry, but you need to *lecture*, and humour stays aside, and there's no storytelling, and there's no joking, and there's none of that, I probably wouldn't last very long. I'd be miserable. I really would. It's something...not for me. I don't...I couldn't...I couldn't teach without it. I'd be a horrible teacher, and I would have no students, and they would not come to class (*Thisbe*).

All participants indicated that they relished the academic freedoms afforded to them through Aspen College, and voiced a collective appreciation for having choice in their method and modes of pedagogical transmission and delivery. After applying a Values Coding approach to this question (Saldaña, 2016), I noticed that the values, attitudes, and beliefs concerning academic self-determination and autonomy in teaching practice were common to all participants. Imagining a humorless classroom, or what it might be like to be forced by college administrators to teach without humour, was impossible for many interview participants:

**Allison:** So I want you to imagine that you are a humorless teacher. You're not permitted to use humour. You don't use humour in the classroom.

**Peasblossom:** (*whispers in mock horror*) I couldn't do my job.

**Allison:** What would that be like for you, and...(*subject shakes head vigorously, eyes wide*)... and how would it affect your ability as a teacher?



**Peasblossom:** I don't think I could do that. I don't think I could teach without some levity. I don't think I could teach, because I wouldn't feel genuine. I suppose I selfishly get as much joy out of getting a laugh out of students as hopefully they do.

Having the ability to freely express their naturally funny demeanors was regarded as integral to the instructors' enjoyment of teaching. Many considered their use of humour a significant manifestation of their entire pedagogical worldview and teaching philosophy. Eighty percent of interview participants stated that their use of humour contributed so greatly to their personal enjoyment of teaching, that, if prohibited from its use in the college classroom, they *could not continue teaching*. Oberon was particularly frank about the relationship between his enjoyment of teaching and his career longevity, saying simply, "The minute it sucks, I'm walking out the door". This sentiment was echoed by Lysander, who said:

I don't think I could do it. I don't think I would *want* to do it. I appreciate how much responsibility we're given...a "freedom" basically, to teach in a manner that we deem appropriate. But yeah, I couldn't imagine...I mean nobody likes a boring teacher!

Discussion around the idea of instructor authenticity came up frequently in response to a question pertaining to the place of humour in individual teaching philosophy. A humorous approach was strongly connected to the expression of personal genuineness. In the words of Peasblossom:

...It's *authentic* for me. When I'm authentic in class, I think that's a better class experience. I've tried to be something I'm not. It doesn't work very well. So I'm always a better teacher when I'm being authentic. So humour is a part of that.

Hippolyta concurred, saying, "It's not a persona when I'm up 'on stage', in my classroom. It's just *me being me*. So that's what I like. It's authentic". Each instructor explained that the practice of teaching with sincerity, authenticity, and humour was not so much a choice, but rather

an essential, integral, inextricable part of their natural character, and personality. Every instructor interviewed articulated a desire to be viewed as a person by his/her students, and agreed that a candid, personalized teaching approach, idiosyncratic or humorous as it might be, was not an option, but, in fact, a requirement, for teaching effectively.

**Research question four:** How do college instructors who use humour in their teaching practices, perceive the quality of their teaching?

**Theme 6: Effective use of humour positively impacts self-perceived teacher-efficacy.**

I think it would affect how I perceive that I teach, for sure. I think that my use of humour allows me to feel like I'm doing something good in the classroom...And I think that it would be a loss of opportunity to be able to provide examples to students to help someone with their learning. My student feedback surveys...often comment on my humour, and also appreciate the use of examples, although not all my examples use humour. Whenever possible I would use those ones. *They value those*. I just don't want to stand in front of a class and talk, and just be a talking head, and then leave. I wouldn't like that as a student in classroom. And I think that's probably why I use humour, because I have a high value for it (*Helena*).

Prior research in the area of teacher-efficacy has shown that the construct is generally difficult to qualify, due to its subjective, and largely affective nature (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). When subjects were asked if they thought using humour made them a better teacher, 80% of instructors indicated that it did. Peasblossom based this perception on the nature of student comments she receives on her student feedback surveys, pertaining to her likability, and passion for her subject:

My instructor feedback surveys are generally, genuinely, always very positive, and there's lots of comments about that I'm funny...But the best compliment I ever got from a

student... because I get enthusiastic about what I teach, and he goes, "*L-----, you're such a nerd and I love you so much*". So. I can make nerd jokes, I can make health-nerd jokes, I'm good with my "nerdness", and I thought, coming from him, it was such a nice compliment - "*You're such a nerd, and I love it!*"

Hippolyta based her perception of her teaching effectiveness on how good a job she was doing at living, and incorporating, the values of the Early Childhood Education field into her teaching. Deeming professional humour deeply important to ECE professionals, she said of her worldview:

I think when you appreciate a different way of seeing the world, and a different way of thinking about professional life, and a different way of thinking about professional practice, you almost authentically would tap into, what I believe everybody possesses, which is their funny bone. Everybody possesses it – it's just a matter of having that mindset that is part of being a "professional".

The criteria for determining what makes a good teacher, and what feeds the self-perception of teacher effectiveness, varied from study participant to study participant. In the opinion of Puck, the best teachers are those whose balance an interplay of effective content delivery with a lively, engaging transmission style. He expressed frustration with those teachers who do not:

Just because you see people standing up there, right? They're good at their vocation, but they're *not good at teaching* their vocation. Everybody feels they can teach just because they can "do", right?...But then they stand up there, and they just lean on this PowerPoint, and they change. I've seen people comfortable in conversations, and they walk in the classroom, and then they become these stiff automatons that are just, you know, pointing at a PowerPoint. It's like, "*Come on!*" (*cringing*). And they're not noticing that everybody

else around them is just...(sighing heavily)...“Just kill me”. So it's not just death by PowerPoint, its death by monotone delivery robots.

Presenting a different viewpoint, Lysander linked his sense of teaching effectiveness with his ability to use humour to emotionally reach his students. He cited humour as a guaranteed medium for breaking down a student's tough emotional barriers:

**Lysander:** I've said, to certain teachers, "I'm going to crack so-and-so" in the classroom, you know, the one that sits there, looks mean, and all that. And I've come up before, and said, "She smiled today!!" Like it's kind of like a *motivating* thing – like I want to get to that person.

**Allison:** But why? What's the motivator behind that?

**Lysander:** Oh that's a good question. I guess it's just because I value that *so much* to get people to lighten up, because to me, lightening up is connecting. It's a way of connecting. If a student who's sitting there, stone-faced, smiles, it's like, "*Okay, I've made a connection with that person*". I always think humour...that has to do it! Like everything else hasn't worked, but if you say something funny, or try and tease that person a little bit somehow, in some way, that you'll get some kind of a spark out of them. And I say, "*Yay, I did it!*"

Several participants acknowledged the reciprocal nature of humour between students and teachers in the classroom, and the satisfaction they experience when there is a two-way humorous exchange between themselves, and their students. Ninety percent of instructors expressed in their interviews that a shared laugh in class contributed to a heightened sense of achievement in their teaching in some way. Helena said:

I think when the students leave on a high, on a positive, with a smile on their face, you know...I often in my day-to-day life use humour to deflect stress, or to react to stress, and

I think that humour in the classroom helps with that. So *they* leave on a positive, and have a good sense of what was talked about, but also feel good about themselves when they leave. And we *all* have that positive energy.

Finally, Peasblossom declared humour an ideal mechanism for helping advance student learning, thereby allowing her a greater sense of personal accomplishment as a college instructor:

...the mentor's job is to provide the scaffold to model, to teach, to mentor, and then as the student learns, you pull the scaffold down. So...I think humour is a gift, and it's a tool...so if we can talk about why humour is important, if we can talk about why character, and honesty, and integrity, and all those other character traits, are important...then you're ready for the next stage.

**Teacher-efficacy is anchored in student perceptions around instructor credibility.**

I think there is a risk that, if you're always cracking jokes, they're kind of like, "*I paid \$2000 to come and see stand-up? That's not what I paid for*". I try to be very cognizant of any jokes I'm making, or the one-liners I'm throwing out there...But it's still a watchful eye on the classroom to see who's engaged by it, and who finds it endearing, for lack of a better word, and who is like, "*Who hired this nut case?*" And then, when I'm talking to those people, I'm very careful to then maintain my professional demeanor, and refer to all the professional pieces of my previous career (*Titania*).

There was strong, shared sentiment among the instructors that humour can be taken too far, effectively undermining, or even destroying, teacher credibility. Peasblossom said, "I can't be a stand-up comedian...So they might want to come to class because it's fun. And we're gonna joke around, but it's like, '*Okay, no guys, actually, there's this stuff that we need to do!*'". The negative comparison of an over-zealous college teacher to a bad stand-up comedian emerged in several interviews. Interview participants were quite vigorous in their condemnation of the

teacher-comedian persona, and the subsequent danger of being viewed as clownish by students if humour was overused in teaching. In the words of Hippolyta:

In terms of credibility, in my experience, if the only dog and pony show that you had was jokes, and it wasn't backed up with true knowledge, and expertise, and experience, they're going to see through you pretty quickly, and be like, "*This is like a show. This is a façade. I'm not learning anything*".

As candid and funny and as the research subjects were in their interviews, the conversations became quite serious when it came to the question of instructor credibility. The caveat on using humour in college teaching was succinctly articulated by Puck, who said, "Humour needs to punctuate the material, not *be* the material". Citing humour overuse as an obvious defense mechanism of an uncomfortable, unskilled, or inexperienced instructor, all subjects were quick to spurn its overemployment. Puck explained, "But there's a balance between cheerleader and a professor, right? And so I feel like you have to really *balance*. Like, you're using humour, but it's not distracting from the learning. It's adding to the learning". Puck went on to elaborate the perils of overusing humour and falling into the "fun professor" role with students:

If you're using it as a *crutch*, then you can just seem like a class clown, or...or...what's another word...just a dumbass...So I think that if there's not a balance, then students are going to get so distracted by the laughing, or whatever, that they're going to be missing the main parts.

While participants agreed that a certain degree of self-deprecating humour, or laughing at oneself, was an excellent way for college instructors to make themselves more relatable to their students, a caution was issued about taking self-critical humour too far. Peasblossom said:

I use a lot of self-deprecating humour. But I think there is a balance. And I think I've sometimes tipped the balance in the wrong direction, because...there are people who will

capitalize on others' spoken acknowledgement of their weaknesses, and see *that* as weakness.

The word “balance” was used repeatedly in many of the interviews. Several instructors warned that presenting humour to students in a consistently unbalanced way could result in a loss of teacher credibility. The general sentiment was that instructors using excessive amounts of humour appear foolish, immature, and incompetent, and are at risk of not only losing control of their classes, but also the respect of their students. And when those aspects of the student-teacher dynamic are forfeited, so too, is perceived teacher-efficacy. When asked directly if being *too* funny could undermine her credibility, Thisbe said:

I think it could, if it's overused. *“I'm teaching you this in a fun way. I'm giving you a story about a time when I went completely sideways, so that you will understand what can happen, in hopes that it won't happen for you, right?”* And not be seen as somebody that *is* a joke. There's a difference between being funny and being humorous, and kind of being seen as just a joker, and not serious.

### **Summary**

Each of the ten study participants spoke passionately about the importance and necessity of including humour in their college teaching practice. Humour, in its myriad forms, was acknowledged overwhelmingly by these instructors, as both essential to fostering the development of closer, more meaningful student-teacher relationships, and also, higher levels of enjoyment in teaching. These college instructors argued that, provided the humorous pedagogy is used appropriately, it can help create more relaxed, healthier, teaching-learning environments that are mutually beneficial for both students, *and* instructors. These study participants voiced a unanimous belief that using humour in their teaching practice is absolutely intrinsic to fostering a heightened sense of personal effectiveness in teaching.

Although opinions differed widely on which humour approaches, types, or vehicles were the most effective in creating more immediate classroom environments, there was strong agreement among participants that humour can act as a powerful tool in bridging gaps, and building relationships, between teachers and students. There was also agreement that using humour properly is as much a developed skill as it is an intuitive art. The interview narratives revealed unequivocally that a discriminating use of pedagogical humour, in whatever form it might take, influences not only the degree and quality of student-teacher relationships, but also the instructors' levels of perceived teaching effectiveness, and, ultimately, their overall enjoyment of teaching.



## **Chapter 5 – Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations**

This chapter will provide a summary of the present study, and provide discussion, implications, and conclusions, based on the key findings of the study, as they relate to the sample population studied. Connections will be made to the existing body of research and literature in the area of humour and pedagogy, and the theoretical frameworks supporting the study. The research questions on which the study is based will be addressed in context of the theoretical frameworks and extent literature. Implications for the practice of teaching in higher education, and recommendations for areas of future research, will be made. Finally, the conclusions section will provide a summation of the major findings of this study.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand how and why college instructors intentionally use humour in their classrooms, and to explore their perceptions of its effects on their student-teacher relationships, and perceived levels of teacher-efficacy. The research question central to this study was, “How do college instructors intentionally use humour to create student-teacher immediacy, and how do they perceive this impacts their effectiveness as teachers?” Four sub-questions underpinned the main research question, and explored instructor perceptions and experiences around how humorous teaching tools are used in the classroom, the way these tools influence the quality, and depth of student-teacher relationships, and the connection between humour-use and teacher enjoyment, as a factor in self-perceived efficaciousness. In this section, key findings are related to each research question, and supported by references to the relevant literature, outlined in Chapter 2.

- 1. What benefits do college instructors perceive in using humorous pedagogical tools in college classrooms?**

The consensus among the research subjects, across programs and teaching disciplines, was that humour benefits *everyone* in the teaching-learning environment. Many research participants began answering the question of *why* they used humour in their teaching practice by, citing the myriad physical, psychological, and social benefits enjoyed by the students in their classes. The most frequently noted student benefits included general relaxation, increased content retention, release of stress, increased engagement, and decreased fear and anxiety. These findings are aligned with those from previous studies on the effects of humour on the student, and student experience (Berk, 1998; Garner, 2005, 2006; Lei, Cohen & Russler, 2010; Martin, 2001, 2007; Pollak & Freda, 1997; Ziv, 1988).

Further probing revealed the instructors felt that teaching with humour was of great benefit to them, as well. Not only did they feel that humour gave them permission to teach more authentically, it also allowed their personalities and “humanness” to come through; traits the instructors believed students find endearing. The study participants admitted feeling more inclined to teach with greater passion and enthusiasm when teaching in a positively charged classroom environment, claiming to effectively feed off the positive energy co-created through the use of humour. Simply put, the friendly atmosphere created through humorous exchanges between students and their instructors simply made the classroom more fun for everyone.

Increased engagement was cited as a core benefit in playful college-level teaching-learning environments, for both students, *and* teachers. This finding builds on the work of Tews et al. (2015), who confirmed a relationship between the presence of fun in the classroom, and increased involvement, because, by its very nature, fun, “facilitates the conditions of engagement” (p.20), or, as Berk (1998) said, “It is physically impossible to laugh and snore at the same time” (p.10). Sharing content-related laughter, jokes, and stories were largely reported

by participants as tools for sensory arousal, and fundamental to keeping both the students and the instructors awake, alert, and attentive.

In addition to instructor-humour increasing student *and* instructor engagement levels, a multitude of other effects were noted in the findings as well, including a sense of increased joy and enjoyment in class, and life outside class, increased overall happiness, increased creativity and expressiveness, an augmented sense of connection with others, improved capacity for learning and retention, increased openness, improved overall classroom climate, a greater capacity for building community, and a reduction, or elimination, of symptoms related to mental illness. These benefits align with the findings of both Check (1997), and Garner (2006), who argued that the release of endorphins, triggered through the act of physical laughter, helps alleviate symptoms of stress and mental strain, proving that laughter truly is the best medicine (Check, 1997).

Other benefits, like increased trust, (Pollack & Freda 1997), the transmutation of negative self-image, and the building of bridges between the instructor and the students, (Lei, Cohen & Russler, 2010), were corroborated by the thick participant narratives, and findings of this present study. Study participants perceived the benefits of using humorous teaching tools so numerous, that the idea of *not* using humour in the classroom, or being forced to teach in a serious, more traditional manner, was, for all those interviewed, not only undesirable, but entirely unimaginable.

There are, however, drawbacks to using humour, which must also be acknowledged in these conclusions. A warning that the excessive use of humour can undermine the credibility of a teacher, and lead to the instructor being perceived as incompetent (Powell & Andresen, 1985), was strongly echoed across the participant interviews. It appears that the informality associated with the laid-back, relaxed tone of a laughing classroom, can upend the delicate student-teacher

dynamic. This is especially true with international students, specifically those used to a more formal, or rigid teaching environment, or, those who are accustomed to a greater distance in authority between students and teachers (Tews, et al., 2015). Several research participants mentioned that humour can be easily be lost in translation with non-domestic student populations, evidencing that fun is, indeed, “somewhat culture dependent” (Tews, et al., 2015, p.25).

Instructors unanimously warned of several serious hazards in adopting an over-zealous humorous approach. These included the possibilities of a loss of class control, inappropriate boundary-crossing through the over-sharing of personal information, failing to transmit content at the expense of comedy, or suffering a complete loss of instructor credibility by appearing immature, clownish, or needy. Torok et al. (2004) warned that humour, when used inappropriately, could be viewed by students as an unnecessary distraction to their learning. The study participants wholeheartedly agreed with Torok et al.’s (2004) claim. Those interviewed stated unequivocally that humour should be used with discretion, and as a tool with which to add value to the learning, certainly not take the place of learning itself. Just as Atherton (2002) stated, “Entertainment in teaching should be an epiphenomenon – a spin off from the achievement of learning, not a route to it” (p.5).

## **2. How do college instructors use humour to create higher levels of student-teacher immediacy?**

A theory espoused by Gorham and Christophel (1990) was that instructors who take a light-hearted approach to teaching are subtly indicating that they enjoy relating to others, and inadvertently communicate this goodwill and benevolence to their students, thus laying the groundwork for the development of positive student-teacher relations. If the student perspective of immediacy is how approachable, (or unapproachable) a teacher might be (Hagenauer & Volet,

2014), the results of the present study indicate that an instructor's use of humour, if not causal in the development of immediacy, can certainly act as an invitation to it. The instructors interviewed for this study reported that they felt a greater degree of comfort teaching in humorous environments, because they found them more conducive to warmer, more affable student-teacher exchanges. This finding is consistent with much of the research examined in Chapter 2, (Albert, 2010; Bain, 2004, 2011; Dalonges & Fried, 2016; Frenzel et al., 2009; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Mehrabian, 1981; Von Culin, et al., 2014; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Yeager & Dweck 2012), documenting the direct, and indirect, effects of humour on immediacy, despite a lack of empirical evidence to suggest that such a casual, or direct relationship actually exists (Goetz, Lüdtke, Nett, Keller, & Lipnevich, 2013; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The results from this study suggest that instructor humour does, indeed, have an overwhelmingly positive effect on student-teacher immediacy.

The findings from this study show that the instructors were spontaneous, creative, and imaginative when it came to using humour as a tool for creating student-teacher immediacy. Provided the humour did not ridicule, belittle, or unpleasantly centre out an individual or a group, and, provided it tied back into the content in some way, there was agreement among the instructors that just about any type of humour (storytelling, general witticisms, self-disparaging humour, black humour, physical humour), can be used effectively to foster student-teacher intimacy. The study participants unanimously supported one key imperative: Instructors using humour *must* abide by certain rules of propriety and professionalism, and remain constantly vigilant that they not cross certain lines or boundaries. This belief has some complexity, however, as, based on the participant narratives, these important boundaries and lines varied greatly from instructor to instructor.

The sheer diversity of instructor opinion surrounding what was, and what was not, considered appropriate humour use, was both fascinating and unexpected. Pressing the study participants to describe their personal humour boundaries, taboos, or “no-no’s”, and the rationale for those boundaries, showed that no two instructors perceived, packaged, or delivered, their pedagogical humour the same way.

The study participants named three factors that informed the stylistic packaging and delivery of their pedagogic humour: (1) choice of humour vehicle, (2) nature of content, and, (3) audience. There was agreement that selection of the right humour vehicle is essential. For example, an instructor spontaneously tap-dancing during a class to see if his students are awake might be well received during a classroom lecture, yet likely not as well during a final exam. Some instructors discouraged the use of sarcasm, dark humour, or teasing, for example, where others wholly supported the use of these, rationalizing their use as having relevance to the field of study. The nature of the content being taught also influenced the way in which instructors packaged and delivered their humour, with instructors leaning heavily towards the use of illustrative, amusing stories, and light-hearted discussion around heavy, dense, or sensitive subject matter. Finally, the instructors stressed the importance of paying attention to the level of audience readiness for whatever humour exchange was coming up, and tailoring the delivery accordingly. The instructors unanimously voiced a concern that college teachers should tread carefully here. Just because a joke or story went over well with students one year, does not guarantee that it will be well-received the next.

Humour, it seems, is both highly personal, and situational. Instructors who wish to use humour as a tool for diminishing perceived distance between themselves and their students, must be constantly sensitive to “the fine line”, and practice a keen awareness of comedic timing, and placement. Establishing personal and professional boundaries is essential. Failure to do so poses

a significant threat to fragile student-teacher relations, and can cause irreparable harm to the perceived credibility of the instructor. This is a finding that is strongly supported in the literature (Huss & Eastep, 2016; Miller, 1979; Powell & Andresen, 1985; Zillmann, 1983). Finally, it was universally expressed by all subjects, that any decisions on humour use and delivery, must always be anchored in respect.

### **3. In what ways does using humour in teaching affect college instructors' teaching enjoyment?**

The college teachers I interviewed shared a strong belief that humour is not only intrinsic to their teaching practice, but also fundamental to their enjoyment of teaching. The results of this study indicate that instructors who infuse their practice of teaching with humour, do so, not by choice, but by imperative. Humour is so deeply enmeshed in both the fabric of their identities as teachers, and unique individuals that assuming pedagogical humour is separate from instructor personality, would be a mistake. A major finding in this study was the realization that the degree to which an instructor experiences enjoyment in teaching, is inextricably embedded in their ability to express their inner sense of humour, and broader personality.

This brings me to one of the most significant, and quite unexpected, findings from this study: *The instructors linked their enjoyment of teaching to the degree of academic freedom and autonomy afforded by the study college.* In their interviews, the research participants passionately described their philosophies of teaching, and the associated pedagogical practices, and the teaching techniques aligned with these philosophies. As I listened to each individual instructor list and describe his/her unique humorous pedagogical approaches, I realized that it was not teaching techniques being identified, but rather aspects of the instructor's truest, most inner person. The instructors' narratives detailed the values, attitudes, and beliefs they individually exhibited in front of their respective student groups. These were, in no way,

disconnected, or distinct, from the instructors' internal identities. Ohanian said, "The really scary thing about teaching, is that we teachers...*teach who we are*. We are the curriculum" (Ohanian, 1999, p.9). Ohanian's perspective is strongly evidenced in these instructors' collective lived experience. The bottom line: Having the ability to freely express their individual teaching philosophies contributes greatly to the instructors' overall happiness, both personal *and* professional, and results in a deep sense of personal satisfaction in teaching.

A climate of academic autonomy and freedom allows humour to flow freely in the classroom, and permits the instructors to teach with a degree of relaxed genuineness, and authenticity. Academic autonomy was deemed absolutely foundational to these instructors' enjoyment of teaching. All subjects shared an aversion to the iconic, traditional, or "professorial" teacher identity, and vividly described how their personal pleasure in teaching was greatly enhanced when they were not serious, but having fun. This supports the previous findings of Torok, McMorris and Lin (2004), who asserted that enjoyment is fostered when instructors abandon the practice of "hiding behind tortoise-shell glasses" (p.19) and instead create a more playful classroom atmosphere.

All instructors mentioned that the process of illuminating curriculum through the sharing of stories, contributed greatly to their enjoyment of teaching, as well. Storytelling, especially the telling of humorous professional missteps and mistakes, allows instructors to share teachable moments in a deeply human way with their students, often triggering the students to respond in kind, and share their own stories. Storytelling promotes mutual enjoyment in teaching-learning, and is an example of the feedback loop alluded to in the literature, through the research of Gorham and Zakahi (1990). Citing a process-product model of immediacy, these researchers describe the relationships between instructors and students as a self-fulfilling prophecy, a type of Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). In it, the teacher exudes trust, confidence, and



goodwill to the students by sharing funny stories that highlight personal mistakes or fallibility, consequently internalizing a positive belief in the students that, they too, are permitted to be less than perfect. This positive feedback loop not only increases the instructor's enjoyment in the entire practice of teaching, it also helps to reinforce a higher level of belief around his/her effectiveness as an educator.

#### **4. How do college instructors who use humour in their teaching practices, perceive the quality of their teaching?**

The goal of this study was to examine the interrelationship of three pedagogical variables: instructor humour, immediacy, and teacher-efficacy. Findings from this study acknowledges that perceived teacher-efficacy is created, driven, and supported by three interrelated themes: (1) academic freedom and autonomy, allowing for control of the expression of individual teaching philosophy, (2) possession of a student-centered teaching agenda, and the degree to which an instructor is able to facilitate student meaning-making, and, (3) conscious creation of a relaxed, supportive classroom climate, resulting in prosocial student-teacher interactions.

In the literature, teacher-efficacy is referred to as an instructor's belief in his/her ability to enhance student learning (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000), and an instructor's "ability to influence valued student outcomes" (Wheatley, 2015, p.748). In terms of these outcomes, and based on the content of the narratives generated for the present study, instructors placed a stronger emphasis on the social and psychological wellbeing of their students, than on their grades, or academic achievements. In this regard, by and large, the study participants perceived themselves as highly effective teachers. The instructors were humble but confident when it came to discussing their perceived impact as teachers in higher education. I came away with the distinct impression that this confidence was rooted in not only their ability to be funny, but also in their

possession of extensive field experience, knowledge, and content expertise.

Thus, based on these findings, the connection between humour and teacher-efficacy emerged as only subtly related at best; the correlation between these phenomena still quite vague, and ill-defined. While there were many moments in the narratives in which the instructors alluded to humour making them better teachers, no discernible, concrete link emerged. Oberon, who teaches many of the “dread”, or gauntlet courses in his program, admitted to using humour, not as a means of increasing his effectiveness, but rather as a tool of self-preservation: “I can deliver content, and have the standards, and not be afraid to maintain those standards, but still end up not being lynched at the end of the term!” The weak findings here align with the declaration in the literature that teacher-efficacy is, indeed, an elusive construct (Tschannen-Moran, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001).

### **Relationships to Theoretical Frameworks**

There is no singular theory declaring humour an effective pedagogical tool. The findings of this study support two separate theories: Mehrabian’s (1981) implicit communication theory, and Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement. Both anchor much of the extent literature concerning the ways in which classroom culture and climate, and relationships in higher education, are created. Both theoretical frameworks undergird this study, and are supported by the evidence presented in the study data and findings. Findings of this study confirm Astin’s (1984) theory that a student’s academic and social involvement in school can increase as a result of more immediate relationships between teachers and students, and Mehrabian’s (1981) theory, that the use of instructor-humour can increase the potential for that immediacy (Torok et al., 2004; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Warnock, 1989).

**Mehrabian's implicit communication theory.**

Mehrabian (1971) coined the term “immediacy”, explaining that immediacy is being “drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, or prefer; and avoiding or moving away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer” (Mehrabian, 1971, p.1). Where an instructor sharing a story is an explicit transaction, all manner of “feelings and attitudes above and beyond the content conveyed by speech” (Mehrabian, 1981, p.2), are considered implicit. Mehrabian argues that both explicit and implicit methods of communication can generate pleasant emotions in the classroom, and provide opportunity for the reduction of perceived emotional distance between teacher and student. The instructors interviewed for this study cited that much of the humour they communicated in class was implicit, in that it existed beyond speech, outside the verbal realm, and included nonverbal channels, like facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, written humour, and even manner of personal dress. As so many of the participant narratives indicated frequent use of implicit messaging through humour, and related these to closer student-teacher relations, Mehrabian's (1981) implicit communication theory is supported by, and remains foundational to, this study.

**Astin's theory of involvement.**

The positive correlation in this study between humour and student engagement provides support for Astin's (1984) theory of involvement, and suggests these two variables are substantially interrelated. Astin (1984), states, “the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement” (p.298). Although there are many aspects to engagement, the present study concerns itself with the aspect of involvement pertaining to students and instructors in a classroom setting.

Astin (1993) claims that, based on the amount of physical and psychological energy invested, students will attach a certain degree of importance to the development of a meaningful

philosophy of life. The findings of this study fully support that notion. Astin (1993) claimed that, “next to the peer group, faculty represent the most significant aspect of the student’s undergraduate development” (p.11). The instructors interviewed for this study agreed that much of the personal development they witness in their students is influenced by the quality of the time spent with their instructors in class, and very much reflected the ways in which they were taught.

### **Limitations**

The findings of the present study are of value in understanding the use of humour within the Faculty of Health, Community Studies, and Public Safety. The size of the population sample measured in this study might be considered a limitation, as a study with more than ten participants might yield different, or more significant, results.

Due to a construct validity issue that emerged after its use, the Humor Orientation Scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991) provided only limited triangulation validity to the interview data. While I attempted to apply alternate triangulation methods to the data through the close examination and cross-reference of field notes and post-interview journal reflections, the hope that the HOS instrument (1991) would add any meaningful data to the study was disappointed. Additionally, based on several instructors’ complaints about the instrument evaluating only their use of humour in the verbal domain, I concluded the instrument was not overly well received; another reason the validity of its measures might be called into question. Failure of the HOS (1991) to reflect nonverbal humour methodologies negated the integrity and accuracy of the tool for reporting an instructor’s true humour orientation.

### **Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study has implications for professional practice for college teachers. The findings reveal there are too many benefits to using a humorous pedagogy to neglect its use in higher education. But despite scholarly literature and research across decades supporting the adoption

or application of humour in higher education teaching, there is a marked lack of faculty training or development opportunities at the study college pertaining to the development of humorous teaching methodologies. I am therefore making the following three recommendations:

**Implications for practice.**

1. **In-house Professional Development:** Offered through Organizational Development and Learning (OD&L), an in-house training for faculty on incorporating humour into teaching practice, would be of great benefit. Within the scholarship of teaching and learning, humour should be considered a competency that can be professionally developed. The workshop could be designed for college instructors who are unsure how, or when, to employ humorous pedagogy, or, for those curious to hear how others are using humour in their teaching. The workshop could introduce a scholarly background on humour and pedagogy, and facilitate discussion around, a) ways in which humour can be used effectively by instructors to deliver curriculum, b) specific humour vehicles to consider incorporating/avoiding into one's teaching practice, and, c) the importance of timing and acknowledging student audience, and content suitability.
2. **CEDP (College Educator Development Program):** As the mission of CEDP is, "to foster teaching excellence through the shared exploration of evidence-based teaching and engagement in ongoing reflective teaching practice" (Fanshawe College, n.d.), a workshop or seminar might also be offered for CEDP participants as a component under the "Creating a Positive Learning Environment" module (Fanshawe College, n.d.).
3. **Instructor Valuation:** For Chairs, Coordinators, or other evaluators, broaden the scope of existing instructor valuation tool(s) to include the appropriate use of humour in the assessment, and provide feedback to instructors undergoing in-class teaching

observations, as part of the probationary period valuation, and professional development process.

### **Future research.**

The relationships between humour and immediacy, humour and teacher-enjoyment, and humour and teacher-efficacy, are chronically under-explored (Gorham & Christophel 1990; Hagenauer & Volet 2014; Velez & Cano, 2008) in academia. Humour, as perceived by college instructors, has emerged as an important area of inquiry in higher education, yet remains largely neglected in scholarly research. This current study shows that humour should be considered essential to any effective teaching-learning construct, and is therefore worthy of further scholarly exploration.

After conducting this study, it is evident that much is still to be learned about the place of humour in higher education. Although the present study contributes to the larger body of knowledge, future research pertaining to the interrelationships of humour, immediacy, and teacher-efficacy, presents a promising way forward. The research participants were in enthusiastic agreement with Warnock's (1989) claim around instructor humour, that, "a continuing commitment to using it, is of the utmost importance" (p.24). In terms of methods, Wheatley (2005), noted, "teacher observations and interviews are extremely rare, and researchers frequently suggest the need for more interpretive research" (p.749). Thus, to advance research in this field, and to fill gaps in the literature, several key areas warrant future investigation:

1. To better understand the relationship between humour and student-teacher immediacy, conduct studies that include classroom observations of both the instructor and the students, in order that communication dynamics and exchanges can be directly observed and recorded.

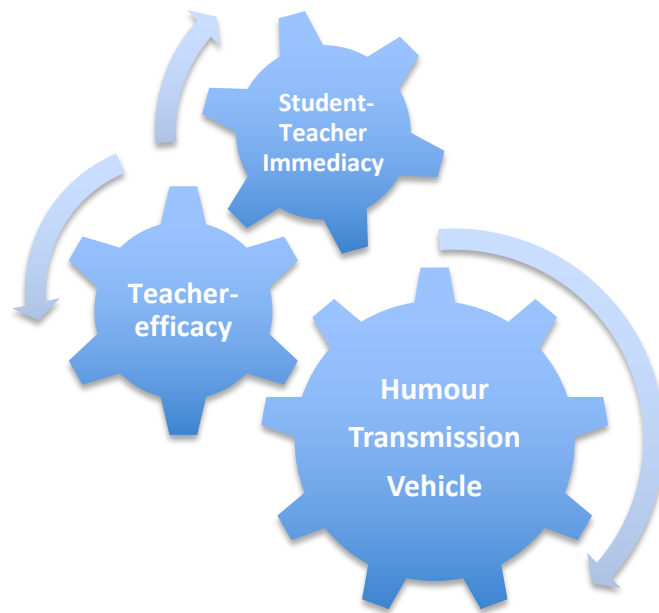
2. Study the role that gender plays in the delivery of humour in the college classroom through qualitative interviews.
3. Conduct longitudinal studies on instructor humour use before, and after, professional development training.
4. Conduct longitudinal studies on humour and teacher-efficacy that include analyses of student perceptions of instructor humour.
5. Study the effect that teaching experience has on humour vehicle selection, use, and delivery.
6. Examine the role of dark/black humour in the de-escalation of student stress responses to specific content.
7. Replicate this study across multiple programs at the study college to illustrate similarities or differences in the findings, in the hopes of establishing greater confidence in the integrity and validity of the study.
8. Replace the Humor Orientation Scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991) with a self-assessment instrument that bases humour orientation on both verbal *and* non-verbal humour domains.
9. Replicate this study with instructors operating specifically in online learning environments, and compare the findings as they pertain to humour transmission methodologies, and perceived student-teacher immediacy.
10. To better understand the relationship between humour use and teacher-efficacy, conduct studies specific only to these variables, using qualitative and quantitative instruments and research methods.

## Conclusions

The results of this study offer important insights into the use of pedagogical humour in a college setting. Having performed an exhaustive analysis of the literature, interview narratives, field notes, and journal reflections, I have reached one overarching conclusion: Humour is a powerful, malleable teaching tool that can be operationalized by college instructors in myriad ways, creating learning climates conducive to greater levels of instructor enjoyment, higher degrees of authentic instructor self-expression, heightened perceptions of student-teacher intimacy, and, to a degree, higher levels of self-perceived teaching efficaciousness.

This study concludes that instructors' perceptions of student-teacher immediacy are driven by their choice of humour vehicle (sarcasm, dark humour, witticisms, etc.), the transmission channels through which the humour is delivered (verbal, nonverbal), and its interaction with perceived teacher-efficacy. It is apparent that these factors are at once interdependent, and mutually influential, shaping how humour is transmitted and received by college instructors, but also *how it is shaped*, by student response and feedback. Humorous transmissions, in whatever form they take, co-create the dynamic of the student-teacher relationship, and in turn, drive perceived teacher-efficacy. This relationship is presented in Figure 4.





*Figure 4.* Interplay of humour, student-teacher immediacy, and teacher-efficacy.

For students and teachers alike, humour is a stress-reliever, a survival tactic, a coping mechanism, a pathway to academic and social comfort, and a conduit for enjoyment. The findings of this study support the popular, prevailing scholarly opinion that humour is a key competence in the creation of effective, enjoyable college environments. The findings from this study conclude that an instructor's level of teaching enjoyment, and perceived teacher-efficacy, are enhanced as a result of adopting a humorous pedagogy. It is fair to conclude then, that simply, humour is good for everyone. The appropriate, judicious use of humour in teaching fosters health, wellbeing, and educational enjoyment, and contributes to a greater sense of fun and joy in learning, for both students, and college instructors.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A – The Humor Orientation Scale**

Below are several descriptions of how you may communicate in general. Please use the scale below to rate the degree to which each statement applies to your communication.

**1. Strongly Disagree    2. Disagree    3. Neutral    4. Agree    5. Strongly Agree**

\_\_\_ 1. I regularly tell jokes and funny stories when in a group.

\_\_\_ 2. People usually laugh when I tell jokes or funny stories.

\_\_\_ 3. I have no memory for jokes or funny stories.

\_\_\_ 4. I can be funny without having to rehearse a joke.

\_\_\_ 5. Being funny is a natural communication style with me.

\_\_\_ 6. I cannot tell a joke well.

\_\_\_ 7. People seldom ask me to tell stories.

\_\_\_ 8. My friends would say I am a funny person.

\_\_\_ 9. People don't seem to pay close attention when I tell a joke.

\_\_\_ 10. Even funny jokes seem flat when I tell them.

\_\_\_ 11. I can easily remember jokes and stories.

\_\_\_ 12. People often ask me to tell jokes or stories.

\_\_\_ 13. My friends would not say that I am a funny person.

\_\_\_ 14. I don't tell jokes or stories even when asked to.

\_\_\_ 15. I tell stories and jokes very well.

\_\_\_ 16. Of all the people I know, I am one of the funniest.

\_\_\_ 17. I use humor to communicate in a variety of situations.

Scoring: After administering, recode (reverse score) items 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14; then sum.

*Used by permission:* Booth-Butterfield, S. & Booth-Butterfield, M. (1991). Humor Orientation Scale. The communication of humor in everyday life: Individual differences in the use of humorous messages. *Southern Communication Journal*, 56, 205-218.



**Appendix B – Participant Letter and Free and Informed Consent****Letter of Information and Free and Informed Consent**

Date: TBA

Dear Participant;

My name is Allison Menegoni and I am a graduate student in the Masters of Arts in Education program at Central Michigan University. As a part of my degree program, I am completing a capstone research project that includes a study of instructors at your college. I will be collecting data on how instructors use humour in their teaching, and its effects on student-teacher relations, and perceived teaching efficacy. I will be gathering data using a personal interview (30-45 mins), and a small questionnaire. I would like to invite you to participate in the research process.

Participation in the research is completely voluntary, and no names will be recorded as part of this process. There are no known risks to participating in this research, and there is no compensation for being a participant. All information collected through the interview and questionnaire will be kept strictly confidential, and only the researcher (myself) and my advisor will have access to this information. The presentation of this data in my final research paper will not allow for the identification of any individual.

You are free to refuse to participate, or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the study at any time, without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your participation will not affect your relationship with the institution involved in this research.

By signing and returning this letter, it is assumed that you are giving informed consent to participate in this research study. Thank you for your time, and please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

***We strive to ensure the confidentiality of your research-related records. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, as we may be required by law to disclose certain information to relevant authorities.***

Sincerely,

*Allison Menegoni*

Allison Menegoni  
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Master of Arts degree in Education candidate  
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Kaleb G. Patrick, Ed.D.  
Central Michigan University  
Master of Arts degree in Education  
Academic Program Director & Faculty

If you are not satisfied with the manner in which the interview is conducted, you may report (anonymously if you so choose) any complaints to the MA in Education program office at 989-774-3144 or 1 800 950-1144, ext. 3144.

## Appendix C - Interview Consent Form

Capstone Research Study: Central Michigan University | Researcher: Allison Menegoni

**Capstone Title:** *So This Funny Thing Happened in Class...A Study on Humour, Student-Teacher Immediacy, and Perceived Teaching-Efficacy*

### 1. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of my study is to see how and why college instructors intentionally use humour in their classrooms, and to explore their perceptions of its effects on their student-teacher relationships, and perceived levels of teacher-efficacy.

### 2. How was I selected for the study?

Program Coordinators were contacted by email by the researcher with intent to conduct this study, looking for recommended instructors who might fit the study criteria. Your name was suggested as a good candidate for this study, either by your Coordinator, or, by another colleague.

### 3. What will be involved in participating?

- Signing an informed consent form (overall participation in study)
- Signing this informed consent (specific to the personal interview)
- A face-to-face, 30-45 minute interview in a private interview room, located in D-3018
- A small self-assessment questionnaire, the Humor Orientation Scale (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991).
- A follow up conversation between yourself and the researcher, once relevant data are collected and transcribed, to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the data.

### 4. Who will know what I say?

Only the researcher will know your name. You will be assigned a pseudonym during the transcription process, and no one reading any part of the study will be able to identify you.

### 5. What risks are associated with participating?

There are no known risks associated with this study. This study has been approved by the Central Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects, and through the External Review Board (ERB) at the study college. Your confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured through the use of a pseudonym. All data will be stored on 2 separate USB flash drives, which will be physically destroyed after the completion of the study. There is no remuneration or reward for participation in the study.

**7. What will be made public, or published?** Excerpts from your interview will be included in the completed study. A written, anonymized transcription of your full interview, and a copy of your completed questionnaire, will be saved and possibly used in future research. Findings may be published in professional journals, or presented at professional conferences.

### 8. If I want more information whom can I contact about the study?

If you are not satisfied with the manner in which the interview is conducted, or need to report any adverse effects from this research, you may contact, (anonymously if you so choose), Dr. Kaleb Patrick, Academic Program Director, and/or the MA in Education program office at (989)

774-3144 or 1-(800) 950-1144, ext. 3144.

I hereby agree to participate in the above-described research. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I may withdraw at any time and/or request that my responses not be used in the study.

**Respondent Name:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(PRINT)

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D – Interview Questions

### Instructor Interview Questions

*Note: Demographic questions will be asked first to establish age, gender, department, and years of teaching experience*

1. Do you see yourself as naturally funny, and is your use of humour in the classroom just an extension of yourself, or did you learn the skill of being funny in order to become a more effective teacher?
2. How do you define humour?
3. Where and when do you use humour do you use in your teaching (for example, in your detailed course plans, assignments, tests, course notes, site documents)? And what forms of humour do you use? (*ie.: written, verbal, nonverbal - jokes, witticisms, physical humour, facial expressions, sarcasm, funny stories, amusing props, cartoons, videos, etc.*)?
4. Why do you intentionally use humour in your teaching?
5. How does your use of humour affect your relationships with students? Is it important that you perceive closeness with your students?
6. In what way(s) do you think using humour makes you a more effective instructor?
7. Can you describe an experience when you used humour as an effective teaching tool? What kind of humour did you use, and what was the outcome?
8. Is there any time humour, or a type of humour, should not be used in the classroom? If so, when? Why?
9. Imagine that you were a humorless teacher (very serious!). What would that be like for you? Do you think it would affect how well you teach? Why?
10. In what ways do you see an instructor's use of humour negatively affecting a student's learning, or perceived teacher credibility, if any?
11. In what ways would you council your un-funny colleagues to incorporate or not incorporate humour into the college classroom?
12. How does humour fit into your overall philosophy of teaching?