

The humorous path to academic success

April 1 2015, by Michael J. I. Brown



You don't always have to be serious to be a successful academic. Credit: Flickr/kennysarmy, CC BY-NC-ND

Academics and universities are in a race: to produce high impact publications, to gain citations, bring in grant income and climb university rankings. In this rat race, perhaps the true path to academic success gets lost.

Good science and [academic success](#) often require good humour. Yes, some tiny fraction of hard working *Nature* and *Science* authors win

Nobel Prizes. But did you know the humorous [Ig Nobel Prize](#) is a more likely path to the Nobel?

Flying frogs

[The Ig Nobel](#) is awarded "for achievements that first make people laugh then make them think". In 2000, [Andre Geim](#) and [Michael Berry](#) more than satisfied those requirements via the superficially absurd achievement of magnetically levitating a frog.

Some Ig Nobel winners, such as the creators of the global financial crisis, are not too proud of their achievements. But Geim and Berry [saw the power of humour](#) to promote and create understanding:

The flying frog aroused interest in magnetism in very different people – scientists and nonscientists – and their reaction was always enthusiastic. Therefore, we want to accept this prize also on behalf of the hundreds who wrote to us with their ideas and asking for details of the magnet setup.

Apart from the promoting science, the levitating frog also required a serious understanding of [certain physics](#) and more than a dash of creativity.

Both traits were again on display when Geim created graphene (single layers of carbon atoms) using [ordinary household sticky tape](#). This achievement resulted in Andre Geim sharing the 2010 Nobel Prize for Physics, just ten years after his Ig Nobel victory.

Unskilled and unaware

The same year Geim and Berry shared their physics Ig Nobel, [Justin Kruger](#) and [David Dunning](#) shared the psychology Ig Nobel for their paper, [Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing](#)

[One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments.](#)

The Dunning-Kruger effect is now [widely known](#), and is best observed in comments following online articles. What is less well known is the humorous experiments Kruger and Dunning used to measure illusory superiority. They used jokes.

Kruger and Dunning asked students to rank jokes from "not at all funny" to "very funny", using a scale from 1 to 11 (yes, [11](#)).

The students compared all sorts of jokes, including those of Woody Allen, Al Frankin and "[really silly](#)" pet jokes. To determine which jokes were truly funny, professional comedians were asked to rank the same jokes as the students using the same scale.

Students were then asked to evaluate their sense of humour relative to their peers. In general, the students with the worst sense of humour grossly overrated their abilities: unskilled and unaware of it.

While one can laugh at the design and execution of Kruger and Dunning's study, it has provided us with new and widely understood insights into the nature of incompetence. It is, without a doubt, high impact yet humorous science.

Get me off your mailing list

Sometimes it seems there isn't enough time to levitate a frog nor ask students to rank jokes. Instead scientists have to deal with email inboxes stuffed with garbage, including invitations to mediocre conferences and requests from dodgy journals.

In 2005 [David Mazières](#) and [Eddie Kohler](#), wrote a mock paper discussing these frustrations, succinctly titled [Get Me Off Your Fucking](#)

[Mailing List](#). The paper's text and figures neatly buttress the title, by repeating the title's seven words hundreds and hundreds of times.

Mazières and Kohler's paper went viral recently when Peter Vamplew, from Federation University Australia, [used it to reply to spam](#) from a vanity publisher, who accepted the profanity laced manuscript for publication.

The resulting mockery of the publisher (both within academia and [the media](#)) cast a spotlight on the [bottom feeders of academic publishing](#). Arguably, Mazières and Kohler's mock paper has done more to highlight this issue than more serious treatises on publishing ethics.

So where are Mazières and Kohler now? They are now faculty at Stanford and Harvard respectively. Is this academic success mere coincidence? I think not.

Mazières and Kohler's swears encapsulation of academic frustrations illustrates that they are astute observers who can succinctly express ideas. These are qualities that are critical for success in science. Either that or it shows academic success leads to an overflowing email inbox.

Success

So how can universities encourage success if humour is required? Perhaps universities can encourage more profanity in academic publications, [snarky citations](#), [filthy acronyms](#), [word play in titles](#) and [authorship puns](#).

Or perhaps not.

Maybe academics themselves need to take a serious look at what frustrates them and what (perhaps simultaneously) makes them laugh.

The best jokes always contain important insights, and that is as true in academia as anywhere.

Humour broadens the audience for scientific research, and can show how science is relevant to our world. It also reminds scientists and their audience how fun science can be.

An academic joke could start the journey towards tenure or a Nobel Prize. Or, if not, at least one can enjoy levitating frogs.

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