

Funny bone: Survey finds 99 percent of science students appreciate instructor humor

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There's nothing like a good laugh to lighten a mood, especially when the atmosphere is serious—like it can be in a science classroom.

Using humor in the classroom has been shown to positively impact [student](#) learning, but what if an instructor simply isn't funny? Or what effect does it have on students if a teacher tells an offensive joke?

In a first-of-its-kind study published today in the journal *PLOS ONE*, researchers from Arizona State University found that students appreciate when instructors tell jokes in [science](#) class, but that female and [male students](#) differ in what topics they find funny or offensive.

Researchers from the School of Life Sciences surveyed students from 25 college science courses about their perceptions of instructor humor. Of the 1,637 respondents, 99 percent say they appreciate instructor humor and believe it improves the classroom experience. Many students also say humor decreases stress, enhances the relationship between students and instructor, and helps them remember what is taught in class.

Researchers were fascinated by the high number of students who valued humor.

"I went into [this study] thinking that maybe we shouldn't be joking in the classroom, but I left the study thinking that instructors should use humor as a way to better connect with students," said Sara Brownell, associate professor in the school and senior author of the paper. "But, as might seem obvious, we need to be careful with what we're joking about because we found the topics that instructors are joking about can have different effects on different students."

What if a science instructor tells a joke that's not funny?

The study found that even if teachers tell jokes that fall flat—jokes that students don't find funny—it did not change the students' attention to course content or their relationship with the instructor.

However, if a teacher tells a joke that is offensive and unfunny, more than 40 percent of students say it decreases their ability to pay attention to course content and negatively affects whether an instructor is seen as relatable. Although this can hurt all students, it may have a larger impact on women.

This study found that men and women in science classrooms differed on what topics they thought were funny or offensive. In the survey, science students were presented with hypothetical topics professors could joke about. Male students were more likely to find hypothetical jokes told by the instructor about gender, sexual orientation, religious identity and race funny, while women were more likely to find these same hypotheticals offensive. However, both men and women find three topics to be funny and not offensive: science, college and television.

"More and more studies are starting to paint a picture that the classroom environment is really important for student learning," said Brownell.

"Science classrooms and the instructors teaching the science are typically described by students as boring, unapproachable and difficult. So, science instructors who try to be funny can create better learning environments, as long as they are not offensive."

What does this mean for instructors?

"They need to think twice about the type of humor they use," said Katelyn Cooper, lead author and postdoctoral researcher in Brownell's lab. "Is it a [joke](#) about cute animals? Probably OK. A pun about science? Probably OK."

Student researchers

One unusual aspect of this study is that it was carried out by 16 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a class that focused on

biology education research. Advertised as a project-based course, the entire class worked on the research project during one semester. The students worked as investigators on the project—formulating the initial research idea, collecting and analyzing data, and editing the final manuscript.

Taija Hendrix, an undergraduate student researcher at the time of the study, said by taking the course, she was able to see the entire process of research from the very beginning. Hendrix said the possibility of being published was exciting.

"This class brought together students from all across the School of Life Sciences, some of whom I probably wouldn't have worked with, but in this course, we were all able to work together towards a common goal," said Hendrix. "The instructors told us they wanted our research to be published. For me, this idea was incredible that something I did would be read not only by other students, but scientists. The idea of contributing to the scientific literature before officially being a scientist myself wasn't something I thought I would have the privilege to do. Because of this course I was able to."

Hendrix graduated in May of 2018 with her bachelor's in biological sciences.

Provided by Arizona State University

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