humor as an INSTRUCTIONAL DEFIBRILLATOR*

Evidence-Based Techniques in Teaching and Assessment

Ronald A. Berk

*DISCLAIMER: No students were harmed or mistreated during the naming of this book, although a few did have "out-of-student-body" experiences before they were revived.
HUMOR AS AN
INSTRUCTIONAL DEFIBRILLATOR
Other books by Ron Berk:

*Professors Are from Mars®, Students Are from Snickers®*
*War and Peace*
*The Grapes of Wrath*
*Hamlet*
*Catcher in the Rye*
*Don Quixote*
*The Writings of Sigmund Freud*
*Harry Potter & the Sorcerer’s Stone*
*The Republic*
*Canterbury Tales*
*The Old Man and the Sea*
*Gray’s Anatomy*
*Dave Barry Slept Here*
*A Beautiful Mind*
*Autobiography of Malcolm X*
*E.T.*
*Beloved*
*The Lord of the Rings*
*Les Misérables*
*2002 Physicians’ Desk Reference*
*Jaws*
*A Tale of Two Cities*
*The Bible (NIV only)*
HUMOR AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL DEFIBRILLATOR

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Ronald A. Berk

STERLING, VIRGINIA
Dedication

TO MY STUDENTS, who energize and inspire me to aspire to new levels of whatever I do.
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Before you quickly flip over this page, you might want to scan it to see if your name is mentioned. I’m kinda sneaky. Check it out.

Since my last humor book, the new humor strategies and ideas I developed for my own classes have been kept alive and visible in the academic community through my presentations at conferences and universities and in research publications. I am extremely grateful to the following conference directors and journal editors for encouraging and challenging my imagination rather than squishing it. Their supportiveness has meant more to me than they will ever know.

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These acknowledgments would be incomplete, in fact, nonexistent without John von Knorring’s willingness to take the risk of publishing this book. However, in all modesty, I did provide some rather compelling arguments, such as: “The prequel to this book sold more than 17 copies, 16 of which were purchased by my mother.” John responded: “How did you get a job at Johns Hopkins?” I am extremely grateful to John (the one without the “s”) and my editor, Larry Goldberg, for their humor, tender loving care of my manuscript, and highest standards of publishing quality, which give me hope that this book will go over the top and sell more than 18 copies.

Finally, none of this would mean anything without a family who recognizes my need for long-term therapy. Over the past year, my wife, Marion, and two daughters, Corinne and Marissa (a.k.a. Boo Boo), plus my son-in-law, Chris, and my mommy have actually attended one of my classes or workshops. After their five heads stopped shaking from side to side and 10 eyeballs stopped rolling, they still talk to me and provide humor support. They remain the greatest blessings in my life.

Ronald A. Berk
INTRODUCTION

Warning: Although this book is written expressly for professors, teachers (K-12), and trainers, if you have the sense of humor of tile grout, then you should not read any further. This book’s not for you. Certainly every academic discipline has its fair share of wingtipped professors who sport pocket protectors and Mr./Ms. Dork designer horn-rimmed glasses that come from the factory with the nose support pre-broken and white tape wrapped around it. They are usually extremely serious about how they present material. That is not the approach taken here. This book is intended to furnish the essential information on the various topics, but in a moderately amusing style so you don’t conk out continuously, just occasionally. Since some of you may have the attention span of goat cheese, the text will be interrupted regularly by warnings such as this one to check if you’re still awake. Are you? Terrific! Heeeere we go.

This book is the sequel to Professors Are from Mars®, Students Are from Snickers® (Magna Publications, 1998), hereafter abbreviated as Gone with the Wind. After you read the title of this book, I suspect there were several questions that immediately raced through your brain, such as:

1. “Are you nuts?”
2. “Unlike your first book, is this one going to be funny?”
3. “Is this a rehash of the same stuff?”
4. “Am I going to have to buy it or should I request it for the library and then copy theirs?”
5. “How funny could a test possibly be?”
6. “Where did I put my car keys?”
The answers are: Yup, Yup, Nope, Yup, Side-Splitting Hilarious, On the Kitchen Table Where You Left Your Glasses.

Now that your most important questions have been addressed, let’s move on with the fluff. I asked myself: “Bucko, why write another book on humor?” To which I responded: “There are so many jokes, so little time; plus I need the royalties in order to replace the front tires on my SUV.” This book also demonstrates that someone with a low score on the SAT can still be productive. Students with low scores often feel discouraged. To those students, I address the following:

NOTICE TO STUDENTS

Many of you believe that if you get a low score on the SAT, you will end up in some no-name college, such as _____?____ College, and eventually get stuck in a reeeaaally boring low-life dead-end loser job, such as host of a “reality TV” program or bodyguard for Jennifer “J. Lo” Lopez. Au contraire! (French expression, literally meaning “Your shorts are on backwards”). Listen up for a moment and stop trying to figure out what body part to pierce next. A low SAT score does not necessarily mean you’ll be a failure. There have been a few, well-known very successful people who performed poorly on the SAT just like you. For example, Albert Einstein scored only 201 on the quantitative section and, as we all know, he went on to invent Afro-Sheen®. So, take heart, there is hope for you too to make a name for yourself in haircare products. You never know what can happen until you try.

This is the sequel you’ve been anxiously awaiting. It is the only spinoff from an original work to have won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, Nobel Prize in physics, Tony Award for best musical, and an Olympic Gold Medal in the shot-put. Now that’s supernaturally amazing. It probably deserves a spot on the Fox TV network. Unlike other sequels, such as Terminator 2, Jaws 2, and Scream 2, this one doesn’t contain expressions such as “girlie mon,” a mechanical shark that explodes, or gratuitous violence. In fact, it’s rated “PG.”

Please take note that this book is “reality based,” nonvirtual. You can feel this rectangular object in your hands, right? Welcome to the interactive World Wide World. This www can be found offline on the Outernet. The only memory you need is in your noggin. Softwear-wise, while reading this book, dress is casual. There’s no scroll bar or hypertext link, not even a keyboard, mouse, or modem. To navigate this book, simply grasp the upper-right corner of each page and turn right to left. Not yet! Wait, I’m not finished. The writing, the research, the jokes, and the students with whom all of the methods have been tested are REAL. This page is real. Even your coffee cup sitting on this paragraph is real. Ouch! Wow, is that hot. I’m imaginary. Kinda Stephen Kingish, huh?
Over the four years since *Gone with the Wind* hit the streets, I have been deluged with feedback on the techniques and material from novice as well as veteran jocular professors. One of those three e-mails even asked me how to purchase a block of seats for the Super Bowl. I have also continued to test ideas that just keep pouring out of my twisted mind. The substance of this book contains that spillage.

This volume plugs gaps and extends humor strategies from my earlier work and adds completely new methods in the areas of music and demonstrations, Web-based and online courses, and student assessment. Approximately 95% of the content is new and 8% is review (Gotcha!). This book has “A Third More Jokes, Same Great Taste.” The techniques have been tested for specific mirthful effects, side effects, and after effects based on research (*Emergency Bulletin*: Wait. This sounds like a clinical-trial study for a life-saving medication, not a teaching technique. Sorry for the interruption. We now rejoin the originally scheduled sentence already in progress) with my own undergraduate and graduate statistics classes over the past eight years. The material has also been presented in over 100 keynote addresses and training sessions to more than 12,000 educators, many of whom clearly communicated their likes and dislikes. Their constructive comments have been incorporated into the content in one form or another; their destructive ones are toast.

What remains unchanged in both books is the underlying purpose: to make me rich! Kidding. That purpose is to use humor to connect with our students and engage them in learning to facilitate their academic success. As we get older, which for me translates into grayer and fatter, a new crop of frisky students enters our classes just as young as the preceding year’s crop. The differences in appearance are obvious: They wear logo-infested gear, cargo pants the size of tents with crotches three feet long (*Note*: These pants typically contain enough material to make all of the sails for every boat entered in America’s Cup), oversized tees, shoes with foot-high elevator-lift soles, and, of course, the ubiquitous baseball caps worn backwards, plus giant spider tattoos, fluorescent-colored Mohawk-spiked hair, and enough rings in their nostrils, lips, ears, eyebrows, and tongues to set off an airport metal detector; I saunter into class looking suave and sophisticated like a Brooks Brothers® version of a Teletubby®. This gap seems to be constantly widening, especially with undergraduates, because we’re the only ones getting older. Their definition of old is “before Ginger left the Spice Girls.” They expect to live 50,000 years. A gap also exists with graduate students, but it’s narrower.

This generational gap is due to our worldly differences. Many of our students cannot relate to nor do they have any interest in our world. We have to take the initiative to reach out to what’s meaningful in their world if we are
going to connect. Otherwise, the barriers that naturally exist, due to our title, age, clothing, eyesight, belt size, and medications, will remain.

We need to search for common denominators to connect with our students. One strategy is to pinpoint elements in both of our worlds that can bridge the gap. The primary source from which I have drawn joke material for both books is the cultural, common ground, nonacademic experiences in our lives. Examples include the broad culture-specific areas of TV programs, movies, plays and musicals, and music. Other more generic topics are computers, the airlines, food, books, sports, pets, power tools, and multitentacled, stalk-eyed aliens.

Although major life-changing phenomena throughout history have occurred in threes, such as *Three Blind Mice*, *Charlie’s Angels*, and tic-tac-toe, this book is organized into only two parts. That’s because this book won’t change your life. It may not even make a dent in how you teach. In fact, if any of the methods actually seem useful, you may want to double your medication dosage. The two parts are teaching and assessment. Each consists of four chapters.

The *teaching* section (Part I) examines the various forms of humor used in teaching, the psychophysiological benefits of humor in teaching and assessment, the use of music and demonstrations to trigger laughter and facilitate learning, and the use of humor on a course Web site or in distance learning. These new outrageous techniques are designed ultimately to convert your classroom into an adult version of *Sesame Street*. Your students should be having so much fun that they probably will not even realize how much they’re learning.

The *assessment* section (Part II) provides an overview of types of classroom assessment, a consumer’s guide to selecting assessment methods, boring general rules for writing test items, even more boring rules for writing multiple-choice items, a free sample of No-Doz® before detecting internal item flaws, and eight techniques for injecting humor into your items. Before you gag at the seriousness of these topics, please know that there is nothing serious about how that material is presented. It is as sick and twisted as the preceding section, plus there are nearly 100 joke examples to illustrate the rules. In fact, you might want to ignore all of the text and just use the items in your classes.

Given the nature of the content in the eight chapters, I suggest beginning with any chapter you are willing to read. If the one you select is underwhelming or knocks you out cold, try another chapter. Hopefully you’ll find something useful.
Warning: As you enter the first few pages of Chapter 1, please be aware that this is a SMOKE-FREE book. If you must inhale substances that would corrode your car’s engine and will gradually turn your lungs into malignant lumps of carbon, I ask that you go outside to the designated penned off area to smoke. Ouch! Did you just put out your cigar in this warning box? If you think I’m being unreasonable here, just wait until you get to Chapter 2 where you will have to put on latex gloves to conform with OSHA Standards to protect yourself from the variety of bodily fluids used to measure the physiological effects of laughter. You can take them off in Chapter 3, which describes strategies for using music (Yes, music!) as a teaching tool to tap your students’ multiple intelligences. Simply by pressing a button on a tape or CD player, you can elicit mirthful responses in your classroom, which can facilitate learning. Consider using the theme from *Star Wars* with light sabers to open the first class of the semester or the theme from *Cops* (“Bad Boys, Bad Boys, What Ya Gonna Do When They Come for You”) with men or “Bad Girl” (Donna Summer) with women to begin a class demonstration. More than 40 different pieces of music are suggested. Finally, Chapter 4 presents more than a dozen online forms of humor that can be placed on any course Web site or distance-education course. A variety of print forms that can be inserted into standard comatose print material on the Web as well as visual and sound effects are described.