Successfully Teaching with Humorous Videos: Videagogy©

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Two Martians travelled to Earth one day in order to learn all they could about the educational system in the United States. After returning to Mars, they presented a report to their leader. The first Martian said that “School in the United States appears to be where the relatively young go to watch the relatively old work.”

If this is an accurate view of the education system in the United States, something needs to change. Of course, the only person who likes change is a baby with a wet diaper. Nevertheless, there is a new and different generation in the classrooms today. The Millennial generation certainly has advanced technological needs, which schools are trying address by turning to the 21st Century knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Consequently, students are changing, the content that needs to be taught is changing, and even the classroom environment (e.g. technology) is changing, so therefore the classroom pedagogy must change. This article explains the research and practice of using technology in the form of humorous, short videos as a main component of a new teaching technique called videagogy©: videos plus pedagogy equal videagogy

Purpose
Using multi-media in the classroom is nothing new, but with the emphasis on technology and the new 21st century knowledge, skills, and dispositions, it has taken on new importance. Students need to learn various aspects of multimedia in order to be competitive in the job market and in the
classroom. Teachers need to utilize multimedia in order to model the concepts while being more efficient and utilizing current research. Whether you love or hate the Partnership for the 21st Century (http://www.p21.org/), many of its concepts are important for teachers and students. For example, students do need to use technology as a tool to research, organize, evaluate and communicate information. And if students need to utilize these skills, teachers better be able to model them. Students and teachers also need to “use digital technologies (computers, PDAs, media players, GPS, etc.), communication/networking tools and social networks appropriately to access, manage, integrate, evaluate and create information to successfully function in a knowledge economy” (http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=350&Itemid=120, ¶ 1). [Remember, you will still get run over if you are on the right track, but are standing still.]
So, if technology, and/or multimedia, are so important in the new educational paradigm, how does humor it into all of this?

**Definition of Humor**
Humor may be defined as “a verbal or nonverbal activity eliciting a positive cognitive or affective response from listeners.” Another key element is that humor must be connected to context in order to be truly funny (Meyer, 1990, pp. 76-79). This means is that humor can include the spoken word, jokes, puns, silly exercises, handouts, overheads, unusual or physical activities, stories, or even pithy sayings. However, Lee Berk, professor at the Schools of Medicine and Public Health, found in her research that laughter results in: 1) enhanced respiration; 2) an increased number of immune cells; 3) an increase in Immune-cell proliferation; 4) a decrease in cortisol; 5) an increase in endorphins; and 6) an increase in salivary immunoglobulin type A concentrations (Howard, 2002, p. 170). Humor has a direct effect on not only the brain, but also many other parts of the body. Robert Provine of the University of Maryland published a book entitled *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. He used MRI brain scans to probe why people cannot tickle themselves to laugh. (I am sure that the government paid for the study.) Neuroscientists used the MRI to detect more neuronal activity in the somatosensory cortex, the part of the brain that registers touch, when you are tickled. The scientists found that laughter is related to our physiology. Laughter blocks the neural relax that regulates muscle tone, hence the expression “going weak with laughter” (Begley, p. 76). More importantly,
laughing is a social function. People will laugh at things not funny, if they are in groups. Laughter is not about humor, or jokes, but our social interactions (Provine, 2000, pp. 43-44), which is a key concept in learning.

**Literature Review**

Instructional media has been used by teachers for decades. Movies, films, and even television have been instructional aids since the 1960s. Then in the 1980s, the technology boom exploded in schools. Computers, editing software, digital cameras, DVD-based videos (just to name a few) infiltrated classrooms. Learning all of the technology became a daunting task for teachers, and using it properly was even more complex. In the 1990s, digital video equipment and software literacy took the medium out of the hands of the teacher and put it squarely in the hands of the student. Recently, the advent of YouTube, video.google.com, and video.yahoo.com the digital video has infiltrated the learning environment. The old way of teaching with overheads is gone, which supports the notion that If the horse is dead, dismount. Yet, the question remains, what is the best instructional usage of electronic media in the classroom?

**Information, Communication, and Technology**

We live in a world filled with information, immediate communication, and rapidly advancing technology. Therefore, gaining skills in the processes of accessing, analyzing, evaluating and creating messages in a wide variety of media modes, genres and forms, is vital. From a broad sense, teachers have been using technology and media in the classroom for years. There is a joke that says it took 20 years for the overhead projector to be accepted in the classroom, while bowling allies had them for years. Have you been bowling lately? Bowling allies have better technology than most of our schools. As technology and new media entered the classroom, research is not far behind, and the results seem to follow the same lines of thought. Teachers believe that the main barriers for the integration of new media were the lack of confidence of teachers, recurring technical faults, and resistance to change. However, advancements in communication and technology occur best when facilitated by strong leadership and planning, sharing of resources, technical support, and schools working with each other and with the local community. (For a solid overview of the research see: Jones, 2004, *A Review of the Research Literature on Barriers to the Uptake of ICT by Teachers and*
Educational Technology
Bruce and Levin (1997), explain that educational technology has the capacity to greatly alter the learning environment. They developed a four-level taxonomy explaining the use of technology in education: a) media for inquiry; b) communication; c) construction; and d) expression. Recently researchers have been investigating the specific use of digital media in the classroom. For example, Ann Haas Dyson (2000) found that younger students should be allowed to connect their academic experience with their practical lives through the use of media. Authors like Hurrell (2001), Sommer (2001), and Harris (2001) all found benefits of using videos, or movies, in the classroom to help students in literacy development, writing or communication.

The use of video technology is a relatively new area of research, but empirical data indicate that it there is a positive correlation between improved learning and using personally created video recordings that are individually meaningful to the learner (Mechling, 2005). Moreover, researchers like Lampert and Ball (1998) found that video and multimedia technology was effective tools in teacher education programs.

Today videos run the gambit of how they are being used in instruction. For example, Stigler and Hiebert (1999) report that the digital video not only may enhance the teaching environment but the technology can add to the culture in classrooms. On the other hand, Goodman (2003) researched the positive teaching and learning aspects of students using videos to produce documentaries as forms of art. Teachers, on the other hand, may use digital videos to “break up” lectures or as interactive media where students view material and are asked their input or to make decisions.

videos are successful at orienting pre-service education students. Seyforth & Golde, (2001) found that movies can be used to acclimate students to college. In an earlier study, Sutherland and Bonwell, (1996) researched how video clips can be used to enhance the classroom experience through active learning, while helping students understand different perspectives.

Research tells us that in any of the situations noted above, teachers cannot simply show a video expect students to learn by themselves. Teachers must have a purpose for using the video and they must connect the visual aid to instruction. For example, Lawson, Bodle, and MacDonough (2007) discovered that videos are best used when teachers utilized driving, or guided questions. Moreover, these concepts are supported Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligence.

**Humor and the Brain**

So, how are digital videos connected to learning? The answer may be as simple as your brain. Research actually denotes that humor, learning, and the brain are infinitely allied. One main function of the brain is make connections in order to see things thoroughly and holistically. Consequently, contrary to popular opinion, there really is no such thing as “right brain” or “left-brain” people. The brain functions as a whole with the corpus callosum joining the left and right hemispheres bi-directionally (Damasio, 1999).

David Sousa writes in *How the Brain Learns* (1995), that the brain is comprised of a trillion cells (give or take one or two) called nerve cells or glial cells. The nerve cells are also called neurons and are held together by the glial cells. Neurons are the main operating parts of the brain and the body’s nervous system. Neurons have thousands of small “branches” extending from its body, called dendrites (from the Greek word for tree). “The dendrites receive electrical impulses from other neurons and transmit them along a long fiber called the axon. There is normally only one axon per neuron” (p. 4). Neurons receive signals through a chemical reaction from other cells through the dendrites over a small gap between the cells, called a synapse (from the Greek term to join together). This electrochemical process can spread throughout the body in 1/5 of a second, while the “neuron can transmit between 250 and 2,500 impulses per second” (p. 4).
The brain can certainly learn new material, but it would rather connect it to previous knowledge because this makes the work of the neurons, dendrites, and synapse operate more efficiently. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that people actually remember less than 1% of what they see, hear, feel, smell, and touch everyday. (This may help explain some of those low grades I received in high school). Through the five senses of the body, the information goes to the area of the brain called the perceptual or sensory register, or the reticular activation system (RAS), located in the brain stem. Through a process of filtering, pertinent information for survival goes on to short-term memory and/or working memory. At any time, if the brain decides that the information is useless (like most of the information my students think they learn in Statistics courses), it is not stored or processed further. (Of course, it must be noted that 42.9% of all statistics are made up on the spot.) If the brain can make a connection to previous experiences, or make sense out of the information, and if it fits into the cognitive belief system, than it may be stored in the long-term memory, e.g. we learn it. However, survival and emotional data have priority over cognitive processing. The amygdala of the brain is always filtering information to see if it should raise an emotion out of the body or if it is a danger to the brain and body. Sousa notes that the brain is a “lean, mean pattern-making machine”. With more than 40,000 bits of information going into the brain every second it must decide quickly and accurately what needs to be remembered, and why.

The brain does not really like details, it would rather look for trends or the “gist” of the material. This fits in nicely with the taxonomy of Benjamin Bloom with knowledge (memorization of details) on the lower end of the scale of learning and evaluation on the higher end with the assessment of theories and patterns as we look at the bigger picture. For the brain to make patterns, it needs to make connections with previous information learned and the material must be relevant. For the brain to be successful at making patterns teachers need to break up their typical lectures. The brain can typically handle about 20 minutes of a lecture without some sort of break. (How many teachers adhere to this brain-friendly way of teaching?) After 20 minutes your brain is taking a mental vacation, thinking about the soccer game that your son is playing tonight or who will get voted off American Idol. Humor and videos are proven teaching techniques that stimulate the brain, help students make connections to material they already know, and
allow students to make a pattern of learning.

**The Brain and Humor**
The main function of the brain is to keep you alive by storing information vital to survival and getting rid of information that has no effect on this goal. Interestingly, the brain weighs approximately three pounds and uses 10 times more oxygen than your lungs, which is 25% of all energy produced by the body (Sousa, 1995). Your brain really works automatically storing survival information in one of several different types of memory.

![Neuron Diagram](image)

All sensory input passes through the amygdala, which is the security part of the brain that determines emotional responses. It is the survival part of the brain, which constantly asks the question: “Do I eat it, does it eat me or do I mate with it.” The brain needs to understand the content of the information to be learned, it must be deemed important, and then it has to be connected to some other relevant information already stored in memory. (Of course, there is a saying that a clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.) Because comedy is a universal language, the concept of humor is already stored in the memory of most people, so learning activities tied to humor can be connected in the brain more readily and thereby more easily stored.

The bottom line is that “When people are laughing, their brains seem to operate more efficiently and symmetrically. Humor seems to facilitate a more balanced cerebral activity that leads to creative thinking. This creative thinking produces different solutions to problems than the individual or group might otherwise generate” (Scriven and Hefferin, 1998, p. 14).

Von Oech (1990) suggested that humor (a) stretches thinking, which helps
develop alternative ideas, (b) promotes ambiguity and the unusual combinations of ideas, and (c) allows conventional rules to be challenged. Von Oech stated that "there is a close relationship between the “haha” of humor and the “ahah” of discovery” (p. 93). For example, you may have received the email that was being sent around with the following pictures and associated creative titles. You may have deleted this email. I saved it and use it all the time in class to have students work on their critical thinking skills, (with a humorous side). First show the picture below and ask students to use their imagination to identify the “title” of the picture. [Titles are listed below the picture.]

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Light Beer  Egg plant  Dr. Pepper  Card shark
Pool table  iPod      Assaulted peanut  Gator aid
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The use of humor has a direct effect on memory and metamemory. The use of humor has been found to increase memory and metamemory judgments on delayed recall testing. In other words, individuals forget more and more details as more time passes; however, humor can increase memory performance (Thompson, 2000). There is an old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words; well, students will remember humorous cartoons better than the literal translations of the information. There is even a connection between humor and decreased heart rate. Humor helps students to remember information longer and better, and can even make them healthier.
Several researchers have found that laughter increases the in-take of oxygen to the blood, while exercising muscles, which ultimately produces endorphins in the body. Endorphins are described as nature’s painkillers (Coleman, 1992, p. 270). This type of physical response increases the efficiency of the brain and consequently can improve memory. Laughing helps memory, but there are other facts at work with memory, e.g. age. The bottom line is that learning and humor are complex entities that are both directly connected to the memory of individuals (Zola, 2003).

All right, so where does humor fit into all of the brain research? Humor is a simple, natural, and easy tool to use in teaching. Add to this statement the fact that the brain wants to connect new material to something it already understands. People like, and understand, humor. In the end, humor makes learning more interesting, it engages students, and most importantly, it helps the brain connect the material to previous knowledge.

Keep it Short and Sweet
The concept of shorter lectures is supported in the research summarized by Jeffrey Young, “Short and Sweet: Technology Shrinks the Lecture” (6/17/08). “Best practices are suggesting that shorter, modular clips ... are more successful than 50-minute sections,” says John G. Flores, chief executive of the United States Distance Learning Association. “Mini-lectures” of 20 minutes or less are being utilized by more and more faculty for both online, and traditional, classrooms partially because students lose interest in material after a short time and partially because the learning style of today’s generation of students is more aligned with technology and brain-friendly teaching pedagogies, i.e. the brain “stuff” previously detailed.

Now let’s connect shorter lectures (more brain-research stuff) to videos that are visual stimulations of the brain. Short digital videos work the same way, and when you put the two together, you get a very successful teaching and learning pedagogy. Dalton Kehoe, communication-studies professor at York, says that he stops lectures every 15 minutes for a humor break. Students submit short, humorous videos to be shown at this time simply to break up the lecture. Kehoe checks out the videos for appropriateness and then has the class vote on the best one to show. However, it should be noted that humor research indicates that if the videos are connected to the material they would
make a more significant impact on the academic learning. In other words, random videos may be funny, but videos connected to content promote learning.

**Videagogy**

Now let's take all of this information and add in technology. As you know, the term pedagogy may be defined as classical the art, science, or profession of teaching. Obviously, there are numerous teaching styles and methods that have proven successful over the years. Let me introduce to you the teaching technique of using videos to engage students in class. A key aspect of utilizing humor is to use visual effects with teaching. Teaching with the use of short videos is not only a fun way to integrate humor but it is a great way to integrate technology; moreover it matches the learning style of many new, young students, and relates directly to Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Videos connected to the material help break-up longer lectures, stimulate the brain, and increase learning because students can now connect the new material with the funny video, thereby storing the information in long-term memory.

YouTube, collegehumor.com/video, yahoo.video.com, and video.google.com, are sites filled with numerous videos that work well in class. Brain research indicates that the most efficient videos are the ones that run from 30 seconds to only a few minutes, which is long enough to get the point home but short enough not to bore the audience. Build a video library on a notebook computer that can be utilized at any time. Categorize the videos by main topic so you can find one for the main lessons. Let me give you a few examples that work really well.

There is a commercial for the European lotto that has a taxi driver stopping in front of a crowd of people. Everyone wants a ride, but the driver is discerning. He turns on the radio and starts lip-sinking the song, Bar Room Blitz by the band, Sweet. Everyone on the curb seems confused except one individual who “gets it”. The individual starts lip-syncing the song, along with the taxi driver who is also playing air guitar. The taxi driver ultimately offers the gentleman a ride and off they go—much to the dismay of everyone else waiting. The commercial fades out and says “Lotto millionaires are not like ordinary millionaires”. I use the video for discussions on topics such as
why we do not have to follow the norm, or how there are topics that some people “get” and others simply do not understand, i.e. statistics. The bottom line with videagogy is that you find short videos that make people look, listen, think, and discuss—e.g. thereby connecting humor, technology, brain-research and critical thinking.

Another example is the US women’s soccer team in a dentist’s office. Mia Hamm comes out into the waiting room with the dentist who explains that Mia has two cavities. All of Mia Hamm’s soccer teammates are there. One by one, each member of the soccer team stands and proclaims, “Then I will have two fillings” even though, the dentist explains, that he just examined them all and they were fine. In the end, the receptionist stands and says “And then I will have two fillings.” The words: “We will take on the world, as a team,” come onto the screen, along with the Nike emblem. This is a wonderful 60 second video depicting team work. Again, the video can be followed by a discussion of cooperation and team work.

There are thousands and thousands of videos on Youtube.com, or teachertube.com, that work very well for teaching. You simply have to take the time to look them over and be a little creative about how to put them into class. Interspersing several of these short videos into a lesson plan, or speech, is an excellent, and funny, way to liven up the classroom, while utilizing brain-research techniques. And the research indicates that students will remember the information better and longer with the use of videos and humor.

Here is a short sampling of possible videos to use in class:

- Any South Park clip—at least the ones where there is no swearing or politically incorrect topics.
- Airbus in 340 seconds: Five minute, fast motion video of an airplane being built.
- Statistics rap: Students rap song explaining statistics.
- Surfer on the news: Surfer attempts to explain his sport, with very poor communication.
- Monty Python argument clinic: Great scene from Monty Python paying a man to get into an argument which becomes redundant.
Not on the test: Song sung by Tom Chapin about kids not studying information because it will not be on the test.

How not to use powerpoint: Don McMillan uses funny, exaggerated examples of mistakes.

Ship vs lighthouse: An arrogant submarine captain argues with unknown vessel on the radio to change course, only to learn that it is actually a lighthouse.

Almost any Royal Bank of Scotland ad.

Herding stray cats: Western cowboys talk about how to herd cats, a parody of herding cows.

ER room rappers: ER employers rap about education in health care. Educational and funny.

Battle Kruger in Africa: A real life video of a buffalo attacked by lions and alligators, but saved by the herd.

Bored in office—men rowing using office chairs to pretend to be rowing a boat.

Riding the escalator: Man and woman get caught on escalator that stops and they are not sure what to do. Very funny.

Friday vs Monday: Short clip of a bear sliding on ice and then a short clip of penguins jumping around incessantly.

These videos are just examples of the millions more on the internet. The key is to look for the videos that connect to your course material. For example, if you are discussing problem-solving in class, use the video on Riding the Escalator.

**Code to Best Practices of Videagogy**

There are several points to consider when using videos.

- The videos need to be short (30 seconds to less than five minutes).
- The funnier the better.
- Any joke or video needs to connect to the material and content in order to promote learning.
- Be sure to abide by copyright laws and regulations. An excellent source for copyright issues may be found at [http://centerforsocialmedia.org/medialiteracy](http://centerforsocialmedia.org/medialiteracy). Specifically, detailing copyright issues with videos, you may want to review
http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/publications/fair_use_in_
In both cases the bottom line is Fair Use in education; “did the user act reasonably and in good faith, in light of general practice in his or her particular field.”

Conclusion
Time for a quiz to summarize the use of videagogy.

Q: How do you get a giraffe in the refrigerator?

A: Open refrigerator, put in giraffe.

This question tests whether you tend to do simple things in an overly complicated way. When using videagogy, keep it simple, use a short and simple video to make your point. Remember: If you think you can do it, you’re right. If you think you can’t do it, you’re still right.

Q: How do you get an Elephant in the refrigerator?

A: Open refrigerator, take out giraffe and put in elephant.
This question tests your ability to think through the repercussions of your actions. As you select the proper video to use, make sure you think about the impact in the classroom. Could the video be found offensive by someone? Does the video make your point, and is it really connected to your material?

Q: The Lion King is hosting an animal conference, all but one animal comes to the conference, which one did not come?

A: The elephant did not come because he is in the refrigerator.

This question tests your memory. Keep track of the reactions you get from the videos. Continue to use the videos appreciated by students, but stop using ones that receive negative feedback. Remember, if the horse is dead, dismount.

Q: There is a river you must cross but it is inhabited by crocodiles. How do you get across?

A: Just swim—all of the crocodiles are at the Lion King’s conference.

This particular question tests whether you learn quickly from your mistakes. You are going to make mistakes in teaching and using videagogy. Don’t
worry about it, learn from the mistakes and grow from the experience.

**References**


Basic Books.


