

# Role of Humour in Nursing Pedagogy

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore nursing educators' perceptions about using humour as a teaching strategy in the classroom setting.

**Study Design:** Qualitative study.

**Place and Duration of the Study:** Shifa College of Nursing, Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University, Islamabad, Pakistan, from September 2021 to January 2022.

**Methodology:** Twelve educators from the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) programme were purposefully selected for their rich and expressive insights. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained, and participants provided informed consent with the option to terminate interviews at any time. Data were collected and analysed simultaneously using content analysis, with rigour maintained per Lincoln and Guba's 1985 trustworthiness framework.

**Results:** The study revealed four key categories from educators' perspectives on using humour as a teaching strategy. First was the humour and learning, with innate vs. acquired competency and teaching phases. Second was the inside track, encompassing revitalisation, critical thinking, eco-friendliness, encouragement culture, self-esteem, and confidence. Third was provocation; with subcategories of language and student diversity. Fourth was the way forward addressed humour applicability and classification.

**Conclusion:** The study explored the importance of humour as a teaching strategy in the classroom, stressing the need to consider context, subject matter, and diverse student needs. It underscores a balanced approach that engages students and fosters inclusivity. The findings are individual differences. Future research should explore the long-term impact and how training can help teachers effectively using humour as a teaching tool.

**Key Words:** Humour teaching strategy, Nursing, Nursing educator, Learning, Pedagogical tool.

**How to cite this article:** Ali BHI, Bardaie NI. Role of Humour in Nursing Pedagogy. *J Coll Physicians Surg Pak* 2024; **34(10)**:1487-1490.

## INTRODUCTION

Humour is defined as the act or ability to make the event or situation lively and attentive or situation that stimulates the laughter.<sup>1</sup> Humour in teaching can be categorised into five types. First, teacher-targeted humour that involves the teacher sharing personal stories which may relate to course content, be unrelated, or reveal something embarrassing. Second, student-targeted humour occurs when the teacher jokes about a student's mistake. Third, untargeted humour addresses an issue or topic without focusing on individuals. Fourth, external source humour comes from a source other than the teacher. Finally, nonverbal humour includes affect display, where the teacher uses facial expressions to entertain students, and kinetic humour, involving physical gestures or movements to elicit laughter.

Sources of humour in teaching include stories, jokes, cartoons, riddles, skits, and parodies. Nursing educators who may not naturally possess a humorous attribute can still integrate humour into their classes by using comics, cartoons, or funny video clips.<sup>2</sup> The researchers suggest that the use of humour in classroom settings can lead to positive student learning outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Using humour in teaching aids in addressing sensitive topics, keeps students engaged, enhances mental well-being, fosters a friendly learning environment, and reduces tension between students and faculty,<sup>3,4</sup> enhancing students' motivation to learn,<sup>5</sup> reducing stress and anxiety,<sup>6</sup> and arousing interest in learning. According to the philosophy of humour, humour can be used to get relief from a stressful situation.<sup>7</sup>

The study by Hackathorn *et al.*,<sup>8</sup> showed that students gave teachers excellent ratings who employed humour in the classroom. Additionally, these students demonstrated better levels of involvement and achievement in the classroom.

Using humour in lectures requires balancing both related and unrelated humour.<sup>3</sup> Irrelevant jokes can lead to student satisfaction with little intellectual gain,<sup>7</sup> decreased self-esteem, and a hostile classroom environment. Overusing humour may also cause student disengagement.<sup>9</sup> The use of humour as a teaching tool in nursing education has garnered attention for its

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Received: September 12, 2023; Revised: August 23, 2024;

Accepted: September 07, 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29271/jcpsp.2024.10.1487>

potential to enhance student engagement and intellectual growth. However, clear guidelines on the optimal use of humour in lectures are lacking, necessitating further exploration. This study aimed to understand the dynamics of humour in nursing education, particularly how inappropriate or excessive humour can negatively impact the learning environment, reducing intellectual gains and harming student self-esteem. Through an explorative descriptive study, the authors seek to investigate nursing educators' perceptions of humour as a classroom teaching strategy.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative explorative-descriptive study was conducted with nursing educators from the Shifa College of Nursing, Islamabad, teaching the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) programme. Purposive sampling was used to select educators with over six months of teaching experience who were vocal and expressive. Educators with less than six months of experience were excluded. In-depth semi-structured interviews, lasting 20 to 30 minutes, were conducted until data saturation was reached at the 12<sup>th</sup> participant. The qualitative data were analysed using content analysis.<sup>10</sup> Data analysis followed Hsieh and Shannon's content analysis method, conducted concurrently with data collection. Interviews were transcribed and verified against audio recordings, and keywords and phrases were highlighted to develop codes. Similar codes were grouped into subcategories, and these into categories in a simultaneous process. Member checking involved participants' feedback for validation and clarification, integrating their engagement into the analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Ethical Review Board, participants were provided with study details and a written informed consent form was obtained ensuring transparency and respect for autonomy. Rigour was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's framework of trustworthiness.<sup>11</sup> Credibility was ensured through extensive participant engagement, allowing ample time for perspectives to be expressed. Dependability was maintained by meticulously documenting each research step in an audit trail. Conformability was assured by discussing interpretations and findings with colleagues not involved in the study. This qualitative study focused on nursing education, emphasising educators' diverse qualifications and experiences, particularly in teaching within this field. This approach supports the applicability of findings to similar educational contexts.

## RESULTS

There were 12 participants in total, 60% of them were female educators, and 40% were males. In this group, senior educators made up 33.33% of the group, 50% of the participants held the title of educator, and 16.66% were assistant professors. To protect participant privacy, a numerical labelling system (P1, P2, etc.) was employed, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study. The study identified categories and subcategories reflecting educators' perspectives on using humour as a teaching strategy. These included humour and learning, followed by subcategories innate vs. acquired compe-

tency and phases of teaching, inside-track, which is followed by subcategories such as revitalised, critical thinking, eco-friendly, and culture of encouragement, self-esteem, and confidence; provocation with the sub-category, speak my language, and different nature of the student; and the way forward which includes applicability and classification of humour (Figure 1).

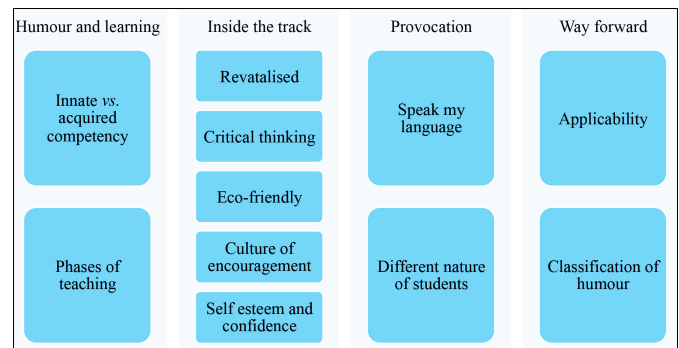


Figure 1: Categories and subcategories.

Humour has emerged as a powerful tool to engage students and foster communication. It extends beyond jokes, motivating a love for learning.

It aids in information retention by creating memorable links between content and humour. Students can relate the humour to the topic and remember it. This skill can be inherent or learned. The use of puns and planned or spontaneous humour can create a dynamic classroom. Humour also energises students and fosters critical thinking. It promotes a friendly atmosphere and positive teacher-student relationships. However, appropriate use is crucial to avoid lowering self-esteem.

Humour can be provocative and potentially damage relationships. Using local dialects can lead to misunderstandings. Diverse student personalities pose challenges in applying humour effectively.

To maintain the effectiveness of humour in teaching, it should be applied thoughtfully. Humour is not universally applicable across all subjects. Teachers must choose the type of humour carefully to avoid negative effects. Thoughtful selection and application of humour can enhance its effectiveness as a pedagogical tool.

## DISCUSSION

The present study explored the use of humour as a teaching strategy in the classroom and its effects on student engagement, learning, and the overall classroom environment. This exploration aligns with a prior study conducted by Kimberley at the University of Portland in 2019, which laid a foundation for understanding humour in education. The findings of the research indicated that teachers utilised humour for three distinct purposes: Fostering positive relationships with students, adding light-heartedness or satire into the teaching process, and establishing a sense of authority within the classroom. These identified motives contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted roles humour plays in educational contexts and provide valuable

insights for educators aiming to enhance their pedagogical practices.<sup>12</sup> The findings highlighted several important aspects of humour in teaching, including its ability to stimulate students' love for learning, promote critical thinking in line with Nienaber *et al.*'s observations in 2019.<sup>13</sup> create an eco-friendly classroom environment, foster positive teacher-student relationships, and enhance self-esteem and confidence.

However, ridicule or bad humour can harm the relationships between teachers and students and affect the learning environment is another study finding that aligns with the notion that various humour styles influence social dynamics and enhance critical thinking skills.<sup>8</sup> This aligns with the existing literature and underscores the importance of comprehending the nuanced impact of different humour styles in educational settings.<sup>2,14</sup> It is evident from the findings that humour when utilised effectively, can serve as a powerful tool for motivating students to actively engage with the subject matter and sustain their attention throughout instructional sessions. This aligns closely with the previous research studies.<sup>13</sup> An important insight emerged from this research, highlighting that humour goes beyond simple joke-telling in educational settings. Instead, it emerges as a strategic tool for educators to create captivating scenarios that inspire students to develop a genuine love for learning. This revelation finds resonance in a quantitative study conducted using the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) among 70 English learning course students from various universities in Malaysia, particularly those learning English as a second language.<sup>3</sup> The findings from the IMI questionnaires emphasised the critical role of nurturing students' intrinsic motivation in the process of learning the English language. The use of humour was found to make the learning experience enjoyable, enabling students to connect with the content in a meaningful way. This pattern of results is consistent with the previous literature conducted at different private and public universities of Lahore, Pakistan.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the study explored the ongoing debate on whether humour development is innate or shaped primarily by life experiences. Some participants believed in a natural talent for humour, while others highlighted the importance of life experiences in refining this skill. The research found that experienced faculty members were better at using humour, likely due to their deep understanding of classroom dynamics and teaching methods. However, it is important to note that humour can be learned and improved upon with practice and reflection. This unique finding underscores the significance of deliberate effort to enhance humour skills.

The study also investigated the integration of humour into different phases of teaching. In the planning phase, teachers can strategically incorporate humour as part of their instructional approach. However, it was observed that some faculty members employed humour randomly or situationally during the implementation phase, adapting to the classroom context. This suggests that while premeditated planning can enhance humour effectiveness, spontaneous utilisation can also effectively engage students. A study conducted at a university in New Zealand, involving five award-winning lecturers, revealed that most educa-

tors use humour both intended and related to the course content, as well as intended but unrelated to the course content.<sup>16</sup> This unique finding underscores the potential impact of incorporating humour into lesson planning for greater effectiveness.

Recognising the significance of incorporating humour in educational settings, it is essential to approach it with care and consideration to avoid potential negative outcomes, taking into consideration the viewpoints of all study participants. Teachers should be mindful of how their humour affects the classroom atmosphere, emphasising the establishment of a supportive and inclusive learning environment. This perspective is reinforced by various research findings that underscored the need for caution, particularly when inappropriate humour is present. The study by Huss and Eastep at Northern Kentucky University examined categories such as humour that disparagingly targets students, humour directed at others, and humour that is offensive and provocative.<sup>17</sup>

A significant finding from the study revolves around the difficulties in understanding the diverse characteristics of students. It was observed that using a language not familiar to some students can lead to conflicts and biases in the classroom. Participants shared instances where students had different reactions to jokes made in a native language, emphasising the importance of using a common language for mutual understanding and promoting inclusivity. This finding corresponds with a similar study conducted at Indonesia University, which underscored the importance of student comprehension in how faculty employ humour. This was assessed through a questionnaire Student-Teacher-Relation quality.<sup>9</sup>

Students' diverse personalities and attitudes present a challenge for a universally applicable humour strategy in the classroom. Some students prefer a serious learning environment, finding humour disruptive. Teachers need to consider individual preferences, recognising that there are limitations to humour usage. Excessive humour can negatively impact the instructor's reputation, diminish student interest, and contribute to increased absenteeism and stress levels. Tonglin *et al.*'s research at the University of Hong Kong underscores the importance of considering cultural differences and psychological well-being when incorporating humour in the classroom. The study suggests that the use of aggressive humour may result in maladaptive behaviours, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and aggression.<sup>18</sup>

In the effective integration of humour into teaching, participants highlighted the importance of assessing its relevance to specific subjects or topics. Teachers must possess the requisite skills and thoughtfully categorise types of humour, including dark humour, sarcastic humour, and good humour. It is essential to consider the potential impact of these humour types on students' self-worth, self-concept, and learning abilities. These insights align with similar findings from a study on the appropriate and inappropriate use of humour by teachers conducted at a mid-sized MidWestern University.<sup>19</sup> The study's main limitation lies in its focus on a single university. To enhance the research, it is recommended to delve into quantitative methods.

## CONCLUSION

The study emphasises the importance of employing humour in the classroom with careful consideration. While humour can be advantageous in enhancing student engagement and creating a positive learning atmosphere, it should be applied thoughtfully, considering the specific context, subject matter, and diverse needs of students. By striking a balance between using humour to actively involve students and maintaining a respectful and inclusive environment, teachers can optimise the benefits of this teaching strategy. The study's findings contribute to the existing body of research on the effectiveness of humour in education, emphasising the need for teachers to be mindful of cultural sensitivities and individual differences. Future research endeavours can delve into investigating the long-term effects of humour on student outcomes and explore the role of training and professional development in facilitating teachers' adept use of humour as a pedagogical tool.

### ETHICAL APPROVAL:

The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University (No. 272-21).

### PATIENTS' CONSENT:

All the participants provided an informed consent.

### COMPETING INTEREST:

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION:

BHIA: Drafting of the manuscript, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data.

NIB: Supervision, review, and editing.

All authors approved the final version of the manuscript to be published.

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