

ABSTRACT

UNDERGRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM

By Tracy R. Ahern

The pedagogical use of humor has been shown to have both psychological and physiological effects on learners. The use of humor in teaching has been linked to learning in several quantitative studies, however qualitative research on humor in nursing education is significantly under-represented. The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive study, therefore, is to explore students' experiences of humor in the classroom.

A phenomenological approach will be taken as a framework for the study. A volunteer sample of 10 undergraduate students from a four year university in Wisconsin will participate in the study. Data will be collected using an semi-structured interview utilizing four open-ended interview questions: (a) Describe an experience when humor was utilized in the classroom in a positive manner, (b) Describe an experience when humor was used in the classroom in a negative manner, (c) Describe an event in which humor did or did not facilitate in your learning and why, (d) Describe humor as you have experienced it in the classroom.

Interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Data will be analyzed for emerging themes. By identifying themes from within stories and across stories a shared experience of humor will be obtained thus allowing for the integration of subjective perspectives of research participants.

UNDERGRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS'
EXPERIENCES OF HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM

By

Tracy R. Ahern

A Clinical Paper Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Science in Nursing
Educator

at

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Oshkosh, Wisconsin 54901-8621

November 2008

APPROVAL

Dempsey, Ph.D.; APNA Advisor

11-12-08 Date Approved

INTERIM PROVOST AND VICE CHANCELLOR

E. Alan Huntman

12/8/2008 Date Approved

FORMAT APPROVAL

Gloria Splittgerber

11/7/2008 Date Approved

I would like to dedicate this project to my loving family. To my father Gary Rose and my grandmother Carol Parchim, who instilled in me the belief that I had the capability to succeed in anything that I put my mind to. To my husband, Tim Ahern, whose love, support, and encouragement has been the foundation of my educational success. To my children, Zachary, Kylie, and Bethani who are the driving forces behind all that I do. I love you and thank you all very much for your patience and love throughout this process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the nursing students who shared their time and experiences with me for this project. I would also like to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. Leona Dempsey, whose guidance, encouragement, and patience, helped me stay on the right track.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION	1
Significance to Nursing	3
Problem Statement	4
Purpose of the Study	5
Research Question	5
Definition of Terms	5
Conceptual Definitions	5
Operational Definitions	6
Assumptions	7
Chapter Summary	7
CHAPTER II – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW ...	9
Introduction	9
Theoretical Framework	9
Literature Review	11
Quantitative Studies	12
Recall and Retention	12
Perception and Learning Experience	13
Appropriate and Inappropriate Classroom Humor	14
Qualitative Studies	14
Effects and Functions of Humor	14
Meaning of Humor in Educational Relationships	15
Perceived Benefits of Humor in the Classroom	16
Chapter Summary	18
CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY	20
Introduction	20
Research Design	20
Population, Sample, and Setting	21
Data Collection Instrument	22
Data Collection Procedures	22
Reliability and Validity	23
Data Analysis Procedures	24
Limitations of the Methodology	25
Chapter Summary	25

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

CHAPTER IV - RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	27
Introduction	27
Demographic Data	27
Interview Process	27
Results	28
Recall and Retention	29
Interpersonal Relationships	33
Content and Non-content Humor	38
Inappropriate Humor	41
Other Findings	43
Discussion of Results	45
Chapter Summary	45
CHAPTER V - SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ...	47
Introduction	47
Summary	47
Conclusions	50
Implications	51
Nursing Education	51
Nursing Research	52
Chapter Summary	53
APPENDIXES	54
Appendix A	54
Appendix B	56
Appendix C	58
Appendix D	60
Appendix E	62
REFERENCES	64

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that humor and laughter make us feel good; they are an integral part of human behavior and everyday life. Humor can be a dynamic interaction between individuals that should portray a positive message and be engaged in therapeutically. Humor is a form of intellectual play, characterized by spontaneous or sportive behavior that connotes kindness and geniality, and carries a message of affection, caring, and humanness. However, when humor is used inappropriately, such as sarcasm or belittling, it can have detrimental effects on interactions between individuals.

The presence of humor is an indication of mental well-being and it minimizes the effect of negative factors and protects from difficulties. Although it is difficult to pinpoint an exact definition of humor in nursing education, a variety of meanings have been applied (Olsson, Kook, Sorenson, & Koch, 2000), some of these include: laughter, happiness, unforeseen events, real humor/art form, jokes, plays on words/puns, situational comedy and political satire.

Scholarly interest in humor has risen dramatically from 1981, when five dissertations concerning humor were written, to 1994 when there were more than 150 (Cannella, Missroon, & Opitz, 1995). Out of this body of research, only one quarter of the studies involved education, and none were related to incorporating humor into the art of teaching nursing (Ulloth, 2002). As the nursing profession has evolved, education of nursing students has become increasingly challenging. A critical role of nurse educators

is to foster a learning environment in which the students may apply their knowledge in a non-threatening environment. Using humor as an adjunct teaching method allows the nurse educator to engage in building trusting relationships with the student and helps to break down barriers in communication between student and educator.

The pedagogical use of humor has been shown to have both psychological and physiological effects on learners. The effects of humor and laughter have been shown to reduce anxiety, decrease stress, enhance self-esteem, and increase self-motivation (Berk, 1998). Glenn (2002) suggests that humor can help an individual engage the learning process by creating a positive emotional and social environment in which defenses are lowered and students are better able to focus and attend to the information being presented. Additionally, humor can serve as a bridge between educators and students by demonstrating a shared understanding and a common psychological bond (Garner, 2006).

Humor use has long been an area of interest for educators. Much of this previous research involved subjects listening to a lecture with humor (experimental condition) or without humor (control condition) and then being tested for recall. The inconsistent findings regarding humor and learning may have been the result of varying experimental conditions in the studies (Aylor & Opplinger, 2003). The use of humor in teaching has been linked to learning in several quantitative studies, although the research has been equivocal.

Humor can be a crucial factor of learning environments and of communication. The use of humor in nursing education has received very little attention. The studies that have been performed focus primarily on the effects of humor on learning performance

using a quantitative approach (Garner, 2006; Berk, 2000; Ziv, 1988). Research topics are mainly focused on learning outcomes, enhanced retention, and better performance (Aylor & Oplinger, 2003; Frymier & Houser, 2000). These quantitative studies do not take into account the subjective perspectives of the research participants nor do they address how the participants perceive humor to affect learning. Qualitative studies focusing on the subjective elements of humor in education are under-represented in the literature and are essentially missing from literature pertaining to the use of humor in nursing education.

Significance to Nursing Education

Nurse educators view learning from many perspectives. Currently, some nurse educators have integrated the holistic approach to nursing education, incorporating body, mind, and spirit. In education, these emerge as focus on the psychomotor, cognitive, and affective development of learners. Humor can be an effective, multi-purpose teaching tool for nurse educators to convey course content, hold students' attention, relieve anxiety, establish rapport, and make learning fun (Ulloth, 2002). Humor appropriately used has the potential to humanize, illustrate, defuse, encourage, reduce anxiety, and keep people thinking (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004). Humor has been said to facilitate the retention of novel information (Cornett, 1986). The effective use of humor in the classroom engenders loyalty, bolsters morale, alleviates stress, signals openness, sweetens criticism, and increases effective leadership (Pierson & Bredeson, 1993). As college classrooms become more diverse both in student population and delivery methods it becomes increasingly imperative for nurse educators to connect with their students on a

variety of levels that students perceive as beneficial to their learning process. Teachers should be models for students. Teachers who are knowledgeable about humor and utilize humor in their classrooms can help students recognize their own sense of humor and how it affects others around them, including their patients.

Problem Statement

Although quantitative studies on humor have been completed on its effects on learning, there have been limited qualitative research studies about humor in education and even fewer on humor in nursing education. The scope is further limited when examining studies reflecting how humor is perceived by students to affect their learning.

The use of humor is a relatively recent innovation in nursing education. Therefore, how it is used and the rationale for using it is unclear. While educators still remain skeptical to the use of humor in the educational setting, students voice their support and appreciation of humor as an adjunct to their education. According to Filmore (1991), children prefer humor 50% more than their teachers do. Nurse educators should look seriously at the intentional use of humor to accomplish educational goals and recognize the benefits of using humor in the classroom. Detailed descriptions of successful use of humor in the classroom are needed if humor is to be considered among teaching strategies that most effectively aid students' learning (Ulloth, 2002).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate nursing students' experiences of humor in the classroom.

Research Question

What is the perceived experience of undergraduate nursing students in regard to humor in the classroom?

Definition of Terms

Conceptual Definitions

Perceive: The process of human transaction with environment. It involves organizing, interpreting, and transforming information from sensory data and memory. Perceptions of reality are uniquely individual, based on a persons total life experiences (McEwen & Wills, 2007).

Experience: The actual participation in something or the direct contact with; the knowledge or skill acquired for actual participation or training in an activity or event; ones total judgments or reaction based on one's past learning (Webster, 2001).

Undergraduate: A college student who has not yet taken his/her first degree.

Nursing student: A member of a college body that has successfully completed admission requirements and is actively taking courses toward a degree as a registered nurse.

Humor: a performative pragmatic accomplishment involving a wide range of communication skills including, but not exclusively involving, language, gesture, the presentation of visual imagery, and situation management. Humor aims at creating a concrete feeling of enjoyment for an audience (Beeman, 2000).

Classroom: A room where students meet for academic classes and to study (Webster, 2001).

Operational Definitions

Perceive: a unique viewpoint of an undergraduate nursing students interaction based on the memory of an event as measured by the responses from the nursing students in their interviews.

Experience: undergraduate nursing student's judgments or reactions based on past learning.

Undergraduate: A college student of any age who has not yet taken his/her first degree and who is attending a 4-year university in Wisconsin.

Nursing Student: A student who is enrolled in their last year of didactic classroom learning prior to graduating with their nursing degree in a 4-year college in Wisconsin.

Humor: What interviewed students say it is.

Classroom: Any undergraduate nursing learning environment where there is interaction between faculty and undergraduate nursing students in their last didactic year of school.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, the following assumptions will be made:

1. The students in this study will demonstrate interest and communicate openly and honestly.
2. People communicate in a variety of ways.
3. Perception of humor is individually determined and is variable.
4. Observable behavior is not only a sign or a symptom of an underlying construct (like humor), but the expression of a whole state of a person.

Summary

Most areas of nursing have theory which guides practice; where no formative education is presented as to the use of humor, and then it is assumed that humor is not always used as effectively as it could be.

The literature on humor attempts to discover what humor is and what makes something funny. What are lacking are attempts to describe perceptions of humor from a student's perspective and how the humor is experienced in the education process. The purpose of this study is to examine undergraduate nursing students' experience of humor in the classroom.

By compiling data and looking for similarities among respondents, further insight will be obtained in relation to experiences as they are related to the use of humor in the classroom. By providing some insight into how students perceive humor in the classroom, educators are more likely to find appropriate styles of communicating with

their students on a level that the student perceive to be beneficial to their learning process.

Very few research studies can be found pertaining to nurse educator's use of humor in the classroom and furthermore, few constructive guidelines are available for nurse educators about the use of humor in the classroom. Beck, Rawlins, & Williams, (1993), recognizes the positive contribution humor can make to human interactions and outlines some of the hazards as well. They also warn against the calculated absence of humor.

This chapter introduced the topic of humor in education and expounded on the lack of qualitative research pertaining to the use of humor in nursing education. Operational and conceptual definitions were defined and assumptions of the study were presented. In chapter two, the theoretical framework and literature review are presented.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, a discussion of the theoretical framework used for this study and a review of the current literature are provided related to humor in the nursing classroom.

Theoretical Framework

The principles of humanistic learning theory provided the theoretical framework for this study. This theory is considered to be both (a) humanistic, reflecting a belief in human-based morality and a concern for people; and (b) phenomenological, describing phenomena as consciously experienced (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Humanistic educators recognize that emotions can have influences on the learning process and human relation skills are one of the major abilities that concerns humanistic educators.

Humanistic educators want learners to have warm interpersonal relationships, to trust others and themselves, and to be aware of others' feelings. The teachers role is to design experiences that help improve the learners' abilities to perceive, feel, wonder, sense, create, fantasize, imagine, and experience (McEwen & Wills, 2007).

The humanistic philosophy of teaching and learning enhances personal growth in students by identifying environmental conditions necessary to facilitate learning (Pine & Boy, 1997).

Humanistic learning theory is appropriate for this study as it emphasizes the importance of how the individual's whole being reacts and interacts with the environment, as the learner perceives it and great emphasis is placed on immediate subjective experience rather than on prior learning. To understand and connect with each other, we must learn how a person subjectively views the world, that is, what is real for her or him. In humanistic education, the whole person, not just the intellect, is engaged in the growth and development that are the signs of real learning. The emotions, the social being, the mind, and the skills needed for a career direction are all focuses of humanistic education (Ogletree, 1974).

In Carl Rogers' theory of student-centered teaching (1983), the learner is in the process of becoming. Rogers believed in the innate potential for growth and development of each individual and supported the notion that the teachers' role should be concerned with the facilitation of the learning experience. The teacher who acts as a facilitator is a provider of learning resources and a sharer of both knowledge and feelings. Quinn (1995) underlines the importance of the relationship between the learner and the facilitator characterizing it as a central element for meaningful learning. This relationship requires particular qualities such as warmth, genuineness, trust, acceptance and empathetic understanding.

Every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he is the center and reacts to it as it is experienced and perceived. Humanistic teaching requires a shift in focus from what the teacher does to what is happening in the student and in the interaction between the two. Rogers' fifth hypothesis (1951) from his learner centered theory states that, "the educational situation that most effectively promotes significant learning is one in which (1) threat to the self of the learner is reduced to a minimum and (2) differentiated perception of the field is facilitated" (p. 1441).

Humanistic teaching allows for discussion of the moments of humanity which can be humorous or emotional and poignant. These events center largely on the need for humans to share, care, communicate, and laugh (Watson, 1995). These moments all become powerful opportunities for teaching, and the responses of teachers can provide powerful lessons for students.

Humor can be employed as a medium in the educator's classroom to minimize threat and to foster an open, trusting, genuine, and accepting relationship between student and educator. If educators hope to instill these receptive, communicative properties in their students, educators must first be able to model these behaviors in a classroom.

Literature Review

The following is a literature review of both qualitative and quantitative studies related to the use of humor in education.

Quantitative Studies

Recall and Retention

Garner (2006) investigated the link between humor and learning by examining the relationship of humor as a pedagogical tool and its impact on learning and retention of information in a university setting. Measures of information recall, as well as satisfaction with the course, the instructor, and the delivery mechanism were assessed. It was predicted that those in the humor group, as compared to the control group, would report higher general satisfaction ratings with the course and would retain more information over time. Participants were 117 undergraduate students who volunteered to review three 1-hour lectures presented in a distance-education format. At the conclusion of each session, participants were asked to complete a brief survey to provide their assessment of the video course delivery. Questions were presented in a 7-point Likert-type format and covered topics relevant to the evaluation of the material. The participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Both groups saw a version of the same digitally video-recorded information by the same instructor. The humor group however, saw a version in which humor had been asserted at the beginning of the lecture and then again at 15 minutes and 35 minutes into the lecture. Results of the study showed a significant difference between the two groups with the humor condition having higher ratings for overall opinion of the lesson, $F(1, 92) = 21.02, p < .001$; how well the lesson communicated the information, $F(1, 92) = 54.86, p < .001$; and rating of the instructor, $F(1, 92) = 43.33, p < .001$. Most important to this research, subjects in the humor group significantly recalled and retained more information regarding the topic $F(1, 92) = 73.81,$

$p < .001$. The author concluded that humor can have a positive effect on student enjoyment and content retention. The use of appropriate humor can facilitate a more relaxed atmosphere and provide a cognitive break that allows students to assimilate the information. Furthermore, the use of humor in this study was shown to enhance the learning environment and have a significantly positive impact on retention of educational materials in a real-world academic setting.

Perception and Learning Experience

Torok, et al. (2006) investigated the use of humor in college classrooms examining how students perceived professors' uses of various types of humor during class and the types of humor that students and faculty recommend for use in class. The study also investigated whether students felt their learning experience improved when their teachers used humor in the classroom. The study spanned three undergraduate disciplines and participants consisted of three instructors from different academic disciplines and 124 of their students. The authors constructed surveys to assess the students' and professors' perceptions of professors' use of humor in the instruction and testing. The surveys consisted of Likert scales, rating scales, modified checklists, and open-ended questions. Questions dealt with use of humor in general academic settings, whether students personally would incorporate humor into classroom instruction and tests, and judgments of the professor's competence and effectiveness. Results of the study indicated that professors often used humor, students supported the use of humor, and both faculty and students favored the more positive types of humor. Students' perceptions of professors' competence/effectiveness was related to teaching style and

humor was viewed as an important teaching tool, especially in courses that are judged by students as tedious and difficult.

Appropriate and Inappropriate Classroom Humor

Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, and Smith (2006), conducted a study of 284 undergraduate communications students to determine what students deemed appropriate classroom and inappropriate classroom humor. The participants were asked two open-ended questions: (a) what types of humor do students consider appropriate for the classroom, and (b) what types of humor do students consider inappropriate for the classroom. Almost half (47%) of the students stated that humor related to course material was appropriate, and 44% of the students said humor unrelated to material was appropriate in many instances. Just under half (42%) of the students labeled disparaging humor, specifically targeting students as the most frequent use of inappropriate behavior.

A primary goal of this study was to begin to understand the competent use of humor as a teaching strategy, by examining what students perceive to be appropriate and inappropriate humor in the classroom. This research study detailed positive and negative humor and can be used to guide instructors who want to use humor appropriately and effectively.

Qualitative Studies

Effects and Functions of Humor

Humor is one the innate abilities that an individual develops while growing up and which is affected by life experiences. In an exploratory study by Olsson, Baacke,

Sorensen, & Kock (2002), an inquiry was made into the effects and functions that humor has on people. The data were based on 20 interviews with participants ranging in age from 17 to 75 years and the question that was asked was: “what does humor mean to you?” The use of a modified grounded theory was used because of its general purpose to explain a given social situation by identifying the core and subsidiary processes operating in it. The procedure was as follows: (a) interviews were recorded in writing, (b) interviews were ‘sentence-concentrated’ (meaning units), (c) conceptualization, (d) major concepts were decided, (e) the dimension and quality of the concepts were determined, (f) similarities and differences were looked for, and (g) concepts were categorized. The results of the study show that there are many different perspectives on humor and that the purpose of humor and laughter depends on a multitude of aspects, such as the communicator’s and the receiver’s different perspectives on humor and on their cultural heritage. Those interviewed pointed out that it was difficult to describe humor and problems with defining humor were apparent in their answers. The importance of words and closeness within a group were stressed by many interviewees. It was underlined that humor was a good tool to be used in communication and in fostering relationships

Meaning of Humor in Educational Relationships

Hayden-Miles (2002) explored the meaning of humor for nursing students within their relationships with their clinical instructors. Participants were female nursing students in their 30’s having completed at least 1 year of their clinical nursing education. Students were asked to describe an experience in which they shared humor with a clinical instructor. Unstructured, audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed

using Diekelmann's process of interpretation. The findings showed that all students described humor as a positive experience. The students descriptions did not include uproarious laughter, but rather, they spoke of humor as "seeing the lighter side" of things. Interpretation of the narratives revealed two constitutive patterns: Teacher as Partner/Teacher as Despot. The narratives revealed that humor, as a way of instructors being open and present to students, powerfully affected students. When students and instructors shared humor, the students believed they were in a respectful relationship with an adult and colleague, and important finding considering the recent trend toward older students entering nursing education.

Perceived Benefits of Humor in the Classroom

In a study examining the perceived benefits of intentionally using humor in the nursing classroom, Ulloth (2002) lends support to the theory that humor benefits learning. A multiple case study of three associate degree nursing instructors and their classes was developed with qualitative methods, which included observations, interviews, and surveys. Data were examined within and across cases for commonality or difference of experience. Subjects were selected from undergraduate nursing schools in a three-state area. Inclusion criteria included: (a) the program had to have at least one teacher who intentionally used humor, (b) the teacher had to be identified by others as a humorist and be available during the study period, and (c) the class had to have at least 10 students. Graduates and students from all three schools exhibited a high degree of agreement in identifying the teacher using the most humor. Audio-taped interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of students selected to represent the class demographics in

gender, age, ethnicity, and self-perception of scholastic ability. The interview process continued until the collected information became repetitive. Triangulation showed internally consistent study results, and cross-case analysis produced intercase consistency. The study revealed that although teachers implemented different kinds of humor in different settings, it was apparent that their students responded in a similar manner, suggesting that humor can be incorporated effectively in nursing education. The teachers and students from all three schools described strikingly similar perceived effects of humor, differing only in the examples used to demonstrate each point. Students perceived benefits of humor included; (a) humor to relieve stress, (b) humor to focus attention, (c) humor to make learning fun, (d) humor to aid learning, and (e) humor to strengthen social relationships. Results from classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires strongly indicate that students enjoy humor in the classroom. No students responded negatively to the effects of humor in the classroom but some cautioned that teachers should keep the humor focused on the class. The results of this study are aligned with those of previous research on the use of humor in education and concur with the conclusions of Bryant and Zillmann (1989):

Many of the claims by teachers for direct benefits from using humor in the classroom have been evaluated in the crucible of empirical evidence. Clear evidence supporting several of these claims has been discovered. For example, the judicious use of humor has been found to facilitate students' attention to educational messages, to make learning more enjoyable, to promote students'

creativity, and under some conditions, to improve information acquisition and retention.

Chapter Summary

In summary, research has shown many positive associations between humor use in the classroom and its' positive effects on learning, but there is a gap in the literature pertaining to students' subjective perceptions of humor and how it affects their learning. Multiple studies have been done on the effects of humor on learning, but these have been primarily quantitative in method and have little reference to humor in nursing education. Studies have indicated that there is a relationship between students' perception of humor and how it affects learning in the college classroom but they leave out the subjective dimension of humor and how it correlates to increased learning.

Humor is a valuable teaching tool in nursing education for establishing a classroom climate conducive to learning. Appropriate and timely humor in the college classroom can foster mutual openness and respect and contribute to overall teaching effectiveness (Kher, Molstad, & Donahue, 1999). Further research to increase our understanding of the perceived benefits of humor on learning can lead to more opportunities for incorporating humor in the college classroom, to aid in further understanding the impact of humor on learning outcomes, and provide a base for suggesting guidelines for the appropriate use of humor (Kher, et al., 1999).

In this chapter humanistic learning theory was discussed as a theoretical framework for this study and a review of literature was performed.

A literature review of both qualitative and quantitative studies indicates that the effect of humor on learning has been primarily studied quantitatively in the education setting. However, there is a shortage of qualitative studies exploring the perceptions of students regarding humor use in the classroom and significantly fewer studies specifically aimed at examining the use of humor in nursing education. Therefore, the current study examines undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of humor and its' use in the nursing education classroom. In chapter three, research methodology and data analysis procedures are presented.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate nursing students' experience of humor in the classroom. In this chapter, the research design, population, sample, setting, data collection instruments, data collection procedure and data analysis are discussed. Also discussed are anticipated limitations of methodology.

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive-phenomenological approach to examine undergraduate nursing students' experience of humor in the classroom was used in this study. Phenomenology has its disciplinary roots in both philosophy and psychology. Descriptive phenomenology seeks to describe and analyze phenomena, as they are experienced, without interjection of researcher bias. Speziale and Carpenter (2007) distinguish phenomenology as a rigorous, critical, and systematic investigative method that is particularly applicable to the discipline of nursing.

The focus of this study was to examine undergraduate nursing students' experience of humor in the classroom. As a descriptive phenomenological study, four steps were followed when looking at data including; (a) bracketing, which is the cognitive process of putting aside one's own beliefs and remaining open to the data; (b) intuiting, which is varying the data until a common understanding of the phenomena

emerges; (c) analyzing, a process that involves identifying the essence of the phenomenon under investigation based on the data obtained; and (d) describing, the aim of which is to communicate and bring to written and verbal description distinct, critical elements of the phenomenon.

This research design is appropriate for the study of students' experience of humor in the classroom because it allowed for in-depth description and deeper understanding of the subjective data as it pertains to student perceptions. The study design revealed rich narrative data and brought to language the perceptions of human experience as it relates to humor in the classroom.

Population, Sample, and Setting

The target population for this study consists of all undergraduate nursing students in the United States. The accessible population consists of approximately 80 undergraduate nursing students attending a 4-year university in Wisconsin. The sample for the study was a convenience or volunteer sample. This allowed for potential participants who have encountered humor in the classroom to come forward and identify themselves. Once inclusion criteria were met, a random sample of 10 students from the learning institution were interviewed. The criteria for sample selection includes: nursing students, either male or female, in their last year of didactic learning prior to graduation, able to speak and write English, self-reported academic standing of C or better, self-reports of being present when humor is being used in the classroom. These inclusion criteria were documented using a demographic questionnaire (Appendix A).

Data Collection Instrument

In this study, the researcher was the instrument for data collection. According to Polit and Hungler (1999), “the researcher helps the informant to describe experiences without leading the discussion. Through in-depth conversations, the researcher strives to gain entrance into the informants’ world; to have full access to their experiences” (p. 246). According to (Polit & Beck, 2004), the concept of researcher as an instrument is frequently used in qualitative research.

Each student was asked to participate in semi-structured interviews and to respond to four open-ended questions that were used to elicit the data and initiate discussion (Appendix B). The open ended questions were asked to encourage the participants to discuss their experiences in detail.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the University of Wisconsin Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Protection of Human Participants (Appendix C). Participants were recruited through the use of a flyer (Appendix D) explaining the purpose of the study and the qualifying eligibility criteria. The flyer was distributed to individuals at the beginning of a senior level nursing class with the instructor’s permission. Potential participants either contacted the researcher directly by phone, or returned the flier with contact information completed in order for the researcher to contact them to set up an interview.

Participants were informed of methods to ensure confidentiality and their right to refuse to participate at any time during the study. Once a participant agreed to participate in the study, a time and place was decided upon for the interview with assurance of privacy. Prior to the start of the interview each participant was informed of methods to ensure confidentiality and his/her right to refuse participation at any time. Each participant was also asked to sign an informed consent (Appendix E) agreeing to participate in the study and another for allowing the audio-taping of the interview and transcription.

Each participant was asked the same four open-ended questions and the interview was scheduled to last approximately 90 minutes. The interview was audio-taped by the researcher and then transcribed verbatim by a third party. Data was collected until data saturation was obtained.

Reliability and Validity

The cognitive process of putting aside one's own beliefs and remaining open to the data is termed bracketing. The researcher attempted to control researcher bias by bracketing any preconceived beliefs and opinions about the phenomena under study. By bracketing preconceived ideas the researcher is demonstrating credibility by controlling for researcher bias. Trustworthiness of the study results was demonstrated through credibility, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility includes activities that increase the probability that credible findings will be produced (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Credibility in this study was established through prolonged engagement with the subject matter.

Confirmability of the findings was accomplished by leaving an audit trail that another individual could follow through outlining the steps of research process. The researcher also had an expert nurse researcher review a portion of a transcript and validate established themes.

Transferability was ensured with the study findings indicating implications for practice. Validity for the study was accomplished by providing supporting quotations for the main themes.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data collection, analysis, and reporting techniques can vary in qualitative research depending on the purpose of the study. The data in this study will be analyzed following the analytic techniques of the Giorgi (1985) method of descriptive phenomenology which focuses on the outcome of the description of the meaning of an experience. The techniques of the Giorgi (1985) method are as follows:

1. The entire description of the experience is read to get a sense of the whole.
2. The description is reread.
3. Transition units from the experience are identified.
4. Psychological insight in each of the meaning units is articulated.

5. The meanings units are synthesized into a consistent descriptive statement regarding the participants' experience. This is referred to as the structure of the experience, (Polit & Beck, 2004).

For the purpose of this study, each of the above steps was carried out for data analysis. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and read multiple times by the researcher to acquire a sense of the data. Significant statements pertaining to the research questions were extracted and themes from within stories and across stories were identified. Through descriptive phenomenological interpretation, individual stories became intelligible by examining them within the context of which they have occurred.

Limitations of the Methodology

There are several potential limitations to the study: (a) small sample size, (b) geographical area consisting only of Midwestern Wisconsin, (c) reliance on students' recall of instructors' uses of humor, and (d) the inexperience of the researcher could introduce researcher bias.

Summary

A descriptive phenomenological approach was used to look at undergraduate nursing students' experiences of humor in the classroom. The researcher conducted 10 interviews to explore and describe these experiences. The researcher was the data collection instrument.

Data was collected after obtaining approval from the University Of Wisconsin Oshkosh Protection Of Human Participants Committee. Participants were assured of confidentiality, minimal risk of harm, and the right to refuse participation. The audio taped interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the techniques of the Giorgi (1985) method.

This chapter covered the following: the research design, population, sample and setting, data collection instrument and procedure, pilot study, reliability and validity, data analysis procedures, and methodological limitations of this study. In chapter four, the results of the study are presented.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate nursing students' experiences of humor in the classroom. In this chapter, the results of the study are presented and discussed.

Demographic Data

Ten participants for this study were chosen from a 4-year university in Midwestern Wisconsin. All participants were in their last didactic year of a registered nurse program. Three of the nursing students were in their last semester of classes and seven of the nursing students were at the senior one level of didactic learning. All participants had a self reported grade point average of a 3.0 or better. All of the participants were female and ranged in age between the ages of 21 and 28 years old, with a mean age of 22.9 years. Eight of the participants were Caucasian and two participants were biracial, one was Asian/Caucasian, the other Mexican/Caucasian. All 10 participants self reported that they had witnessed humor being used in the classroom.

Interview Process

An informational flyer was distributed to all senior level nursing students in a Midwestern Wisconsin university. All students who wished to volunteer were then asked to fill out demographic questionnaires and return them to their professor or to leave them

at the end of class for the researcher to pick up. Out of 38 returned questionnaires, 10 were randomly selected and inclusion criteria were met.

The participants were contacted by telephone to participate in the study and the study was explained to each person. If they agreed to participate in the study, a mutually agreed upon time was arranged for the interview. Written informed consent for the interview and for the audio-taping were reviewed with each participant and signed prior to data collection. All audiotapes, transcripts, demographic data sheets, consent forms, and notes were kept in the researchers' home office. The consent documents were kept separate from the audiotapes, transcripts and demographic data sheets.

Each interview was conducted face-to-face and took place in the nursing building of the university in which the participants attended. All of the interviews were informal and the participants spoke freely and appeared comfortable and relaxed during the interview process. The interviews lasted from 20 to 45 minutes. Each participant was encouraged to contact the researcher if they desired any further information or if they desired to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason.

Results

Transcripts were analyzed using a variation of the analytic techniques of the Giorgi (1985) method of descriptive phenomenology which focuses on the outcome of the description of the meaning of an experience. Participants described their experiences of humor in the classroom. The transcripts of these experiences were read and reread in their entirety by the researcher to become completely familiar with the contents.

Significant statements were highlighted and notations were made in the transcript margins. As particular themes emerged, they were noted and compared to the other transcripts. These themes were then organized into clusters or groups and verified by returning to the original transcripts to check for accuracy. Four major themes emerged and were used to provide a description of the experiences of humor in the classroom. The four themes included: (a) recall and retention, (b) interpersonal relations, (c) content and non-content humor, and (d) inappropriate humor.

Recall and Retention

The first theme that emerged was recall and retention. According to Webster's Dictionary (2001), recall is the act of remembering or recollecting and retention is the act or condition of being retained. All 10 of the students who were interviewed expressed increased capacity to retain and recall information being taught when humor was included in the lesson or lecture. Participants unanimously agreed that content related humor in the classroom facilitated learning.

The participants were asked to describe a situation where they felt humor was used positively in the classroom. Two of the students described an experience involving a professor utilizing humor in her lecture regarding the avian flu and the positive effect it had on their retention and recall:

Student One: When we were talking about the avian flu, my professor dressed up in a chicken costume and did this whole skit with a nurse and it was just funny. It helped me remember because my professor was experiencing the symptoms of avian flu where she said, "oh, my tummy hurts," and things

like that were the things that helped me. It was a visual representation to help me remember for what we were getting tested on. I remember her doing this, so this must be that answer.

Student Two: Um, one of my professors-she's a microbiology teacher. She's hilarious. She was always saying something funny. But, um, one time she came in a chicken suit and did a little skit on the avian flu and it was hilarious and I actually remember things more that way, you know, about the flu because of her little skit.

Further support for utilizing humor as an aid in retention and recall of material was raised by three students who shared their similar humor experiences in the context of an obstetrics class:

Student One: We were talking about, like I think it was pelvic or rectums and the teacher got up on the table and like demonstrated and it was really funny . . . but it helps you remember it because it like gives you a visual aid of what it looks like.

Student Two: Um, it was my OB class and what the professor did is she got the baby belly and brought that in and she picked one of the guys in the class to put it on I feel like I learned a great deal from that experience at school . . there were questions on the test that even though it wasn't specifically lecture format . . . because it was humorous I remember what was said; I remember okay, the bleeding was because of that reason. Okay. And then I remember it on the exam.

Student Three: The positions for having a baby. The teacher literally jumped up on the table and showed us the position and she used a male student to put on the belly suit and had him do all the positions and I remember them clearly . . . it helps me remember things because when you remember a joke you're going to go, "hey that joke is about this. Oh, that's the answer." And actually on exams can remember in my head jokes my teacher's made about this and I get it right.

One student recalls a humorous physiology teacher teaching about different body systems using a humorous song and dance. This student credits the use of humor for her long term retention of the information being taught:

We were learning about different body systems and one of things was calcitonin and she did this dance . . . and it was pretty funny, but I still remember that and I took that class my freshmen year, so I still remember that and that's how I remember it's the calcitonin dance.

These experiences allude to the fact that when used effectively, humor in the classroom is not a distraction but rather a vehicle for reaching students with a variety of different learning styles.

Utilizing humor as a mechanism for retention and recall can be incorporated into any curriculum and can be used to soften arduous subject matter. For example, the concepts of mental health are often difficult for students to construe; many times they are abstract and foreign causing feelings of discomfort and unfamiliarity for students. Using

humor can help ease the tension of trying to grasp subject matter while aiding in retention of key concepts.

Three students shared their experiences from a mental health class and how the use of humor helped them recall and retain key concepts as well as deal with sensitive subject matter. All three students talked of the professor using various types of humorous costumes to help illustrate the lesson for the day:

Student One: We were talking about the difference between delirium and dementia and we were talking specifically about dementia and she had a t-shirt on today that she had a little coat over it and unzipped it and underneath the t-shirt said, “my mind is like a steel watchamacallit.” She was trying to make the point between distinguishing between delirium and dementia and I thought that was a good way . . . I think once I get to the test it’s something that I’ll remember.

Student Two:was trying to describe bipolar and she came in with just kind of dark clothes and droopy mood.....she started with that and she was describing kind of more of that depressed kind of thing....later in the class she pulled out a poofy hat and put on some like draped thing and she was describing more of the manic side of things....it sticks in my head and I was able to relate it to the test and able to relate to experiences in clinical.

Student Three:we were discussing bipolar disease and she dressed up and she was very, very much fancy clothing....very much acting like someone who was in a manic phase of bipolar, and then she went to the depression phase

of bipolar, and she took all her fancy clothes off and she was like kind of depressed and I thought it was very positive, very - and when I was taking the exam actually I was thinking of some of the things that she had done, so it really helped me remember on my exam.

Other comments made by various students supporting humors' position in aiding recall and retention included; (a) "and it helps you remember things if you're interested and keep things fun and the like"; (b) "... sometimes it can be a funny one (example) or something like that, but it helps us to understand it and remember it"; (c) "... I think it really enhances what I'm learning and I do remember it better because I remember those instances; I can remember those funny moments and remember what was said"; (d) it (humor) helps, it reduces stress, helps me remember concepts"; and (e) "there's so many teachers that just write everything on a chalkboard that you can't possibly remember everything, but something different like that, it just kind of sticks with you."

Interpersonal Relationships

The second theme that emerged was interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships involve social interactions or associations between two or more people and imply kinship, friendship, or a natural affiliation. The theme of interpersonal relationships was addressed in a multitude of ways throughout all 10 of the interview transcripts.

Four of the interviewed students discussed their experiences with humor and interpersonal relationships in the context of increased comfort levels with professors who utilize humor in their classrooms compared to those who do not.

Student One: Definitely I would say it improves the relationship between professor and student. And I know I would feel more comfortable approaching a professor who has used humor in the classroom. And I know a friend of mine who is struggling in a class, there were two professors . . . one used humor in the classroom more and the other one kind of didn't . . . it's a comfort level and she definitely felt more comfortable approaching the other professor who has used humor in the classroom.

Student Two: By telling all those jokes you feel like you're more comfortable with them so you can go and talk to them and if you have a question of a class I guess that would be a good thing, but you also develop more of that friend relationship.

Student Three: It seems like kids are more comfortable in the classroom and, um, you find more kids participating . . . I think that I would almost be more comfortable with someone that uses humor because it shows that they have like a really open side about them and they are-it almost seems like they're going that extra mile to establish that relationship with the student and try to get closer to them using the humor method. You're interacting with them more during classes and you're more willing to go to them on a personal basis . . . I think that if they're using humor, they're developing this relationship that's more personal.

Student Four: I feel more comfortable around instructors who use humor . . . there's more of that comfort level. I don't know if it's a shared kind of

appreciation, or, um, I guess ones that don't use humor I don't know how to relate them maybe or talk to them. I feel like they're just not as much personable maybe.

Approachability was an important factor in quality interpersonal relationships between faculty and students. To be approachable faculty have to be accessible on a personal level. Many of the students reported increase levels of satisfaction with instructors who were deemed approachable, at least in part because of their use of humor.

Student One: I think that you can approach teachers more if you know that they have not an uptight side to them that okay, they are human too. They do make jokes, they do have a life outside of right here in the classroom and I think it helps. I know personally I'm more likely to say "Okay, well I can go to their office and not feel so scared to talk to them," because they've kind of opened up a little more . . . where ones that just stick to the lesson plan, I'm a little more timid to go see them.

Student Two: I feel a lot closer to the professors who do use humor . . . they're more open and welcoming and the other ones, they don't seem like they feel like they get a real connection to their students. I think they're just more heartwarming. you feel like they relate to you. . . . they were willing to share with you just makes them more open and I'm more willing to talk to someone who's funny than someone who's bland . . . I would much prefer a teacher who incorporates humor into the classroom.

Student Three: I do feel they are a little more approachable because kind of like an icebreaker, kind of puts you more at similar levels than if they were just kind of stoic and not really, you know, humorous or anything and you kind of feel like they're not approachable or not relating to you in a certain way in my personal viewpoint, I don't think it's not professional to use humor . . . it helps me, I think, like the professors more it makes me enjoy the class.

Student Four: Some of the professors I have . . . are more straightforward . . . they usually don't use humor in the classroom . . . when they do make a joke or something like that that it really does help with your perception of them that they are human and they're not some robot up there and I guess you can relate to them more and relate to the content more. Whereas if you just see this robot up there . . . talking to you everyday, it's a little intimidating and that's not good for learning, either.

Other interviewed students also reported that they felt the quality of the interactions were preferable when they were interacting with faculty that used humor. One student said, "I like their class and I like to talk to the teacher as a person." Another student who self reported being very shy by nature found it easier to make a connection with faculty who used humor stating, " they're not just talking to me; they're connecting with the classroom and so I feel like I have a better connection with those professors . . . I just feel like it really enhances my learning."

Another student reported an increased feeling of bonding with faculty using humor. She said “humor makes the professors seem more human and real. . . and I think it better builds the bond between student and professor.” The same student commented on her perception of the invisible educational divide between faculty and student noting that at times the educational process is more about “imparting knowledge” and faculty “superiority”. She stated that “humor makes them relatable . . . you learn better, in my opinion, better from someone who does not take that (superiority) position. And like I said, it keeps that, I don’t know, bond. Three other students echoed these sentiments stating:

Student One: It definitely helps to be able to have a better relationship with your teachers. It’s kind of fun and you can tell that teacher anything and they’ll take it in stride and it helps to have a better relationship with that teacher . . . Some teachers are just not humorous . . . they’re used to the old-school style when you learn this, this and this and boom, that’s it.

Student Two: Some classes are so stern that you wish that they would kind of tie some humor into it. I just remember one of my classes my teacher just sat up there just reading slides over and over . . . if she kind of put us at ease a little more . . . it would have been good.

Student Three: I think it (humor) definitely makes them (instructors) more approachable. Some instructors that I’ve had are very, you know, straight and narrow; this is how things are done and, you know, they don’t show any emotion at

all and that is very intimidating for a student to go up and ask for help and if you can't relate to them as human being on that level.

Content and Non-content Humor

Humor that is related to the content of a course can help the educator illustrate a point and create a memory tool for retaining concepts; non-content related humor is often linked to reducing stress and increasing or grabbing attention. Of the 10 students interviewed eight stated that they have seen content related humor in their classrooms more often than that of non-content related humor. Two students felt they have witnessed non-content related humor more often than content related humor, and one student did not directly answer the question. The student who did not directly answer the question did give several examples of content related humor that she had witnessed in the classroom and associated these experiences with increased retention of material.

The eight students that stated they see content related humor more often than non-content related humor shared the following comments: (a) “ I would say in most cases it is content related and I would say that it's helpful for later on”; (b) “probably more related to content . . . if there's something they can relate it to that's funny, it's more likely to stick in their minds . . . to reiterate what they were saying, humor acts in the same way because it's going to stick out in their minds”; (c) “some professors are very good at taking content and making it humorous . . . a lot of the time it's related to what you're learning and you remember it better on exams”; (d) “ I would say that humor that's for the content is probably more useful”; (e) “I would like to see it (humor) used more . . . specifically related because it really does stick in your memory and , I don't

know, makes it fun”; (f) “. . . to content like they’ll make a reference or tell a story related to something that we’re talking about and it kind of helps you remember”; and (g) “ the teachers that have set jokes, it’s probably the same jokes semester after semester . . . so I think I see that a lot . . . especially if it’s a joke related to the content because then that kind of can help you remember a thing or two.”

The 10 students interviewed unanimously agreed that content related humor was appropriate in the classroom and facilitated learning in one form or another. All 10 of the students reported increased retention of materials covered when humor was incorporated into the lesson. Seven of ten students reported feelings of decreased anxiety and stress in a classroom where humor was present in a contextual capacity. As one student states, “ it relaxes the mood . . . just to get a laugh out of us just to start the class off right, it kind of sets the tone . . . where it’s not so intense.”

The two students who stated that their experiences with humor were most often non-content related shared their thoughts:

Student One: I would say that overall most of the humor in the classroom is not for the content, not remembering certain things. However, there have been times when there’d be a funny song . . . like the cranial nerves. I find myself, even if it’s not directly related . . . enjoying the class period and if I’m enjoying it, I’m paying more attention and getting more out of it.

Student Two: I’ve seen both. I’ve seen content related, but actually I probably see more of non-content related humor used . . . a lot of them will just say something funny in their lectures just to like break up the silence and get

us to laugh. I feel like when I'm in those classes that I want to listen because I know that I'm getting something out of it and I'm not just sitting there bored and falling asleep. I actually am remembering things and wanting to listen more. I have a drive to go to those classes because I feel like I'm going to be able to listen and focus and it's funny; it keeps me intrigued and the classes where there's not humor I have no drive to go.

Other students had varying opinions of non-content related humor that ranged from attention grabbing to learning distraction. Some of these experiences are depicted in the following quotes:

Student One: I think that if a teacher makes just side comments that don't really have to do with the material, you kind of – your focus is kind of distracted off of the content . . . if it's just random . . . it can detract, especially if it's just joke after joke and that's more of the class than the actual content . . . it puts more pressure on you . . . the test it's still going to be the same questions, but you have more responsibility that you have to learn by yourself. Some of the off-the-collar things that can help with just setting the tone of classroom and making it more comfortable for students to relax are good . . . if it's too much humor, then it can be a distraction.

Student Two: I think it just kind of refreshes your brain sometimes and takes you away from the content for a minute. . . you laugh about something and they try to give you a little break . . . I appreciate that . . . personally it (non-content humor) is not distracting me; no.

Student Three: I've seen several professors start off each semester or maybe starting off every class either by telling a joke or more or less a funny story and that tends to wake people up and it tends to help classes that are later in the day when the majority of the class is tired and bored . . . you know, they want to wake everybody up and get their attention.

Student Four: It (non-content humor) really bothers me because it's wasting my time. You're off laughing at something else and then the material . . . is completely lost. The professor liked to start every Friday morning off with a story . . . but her stories wouldn't relate to what we were learning . . . it took probably 25-30 minutes to tell . . . we didn't get to finish the material, which was on the exam the next week and then it was stuff we had to learn on our own because we didn't get to cover it at all.

Other comments that were made related to non-content humor included; (a) "it's nice to have that ice breaker"; (b) "some of the stories were funny and just got us relaxed. We were more awake; we were then paying attention to the content more"; and (c) "it keeps me interested and wanting to know what is coming next."

Inappropriate Humor

To be inappropriate something is not suitable or fitting for use or occasion. Of the 10 students interviewed, 3 stated instances of inappropriate humor which personally offended them and made learning more difficult. The first student describes a situation that occurred more than 15 years ago and how it changed the way she viewed that particular teacher. "There was this overweight boy and one of my teachers made a

comment . . . I guess that would have been really hurtful for that boy and I felt bad for him.”

A second student recalls a situation that a teacher made a sexual innuendo and how she felt about having to return to that class, and also related another situation which left her feeling isolated in nursing school:

Situation One: He thought he was joking, but he wasn't. He made many of the girls in the classroom feel very silent. But, you know, they think they're being funny. "Oh, wear that low-cut dress and I'll give you an A," was his comment and I thought that was completely inappropriate . . . made me never want to go . . . but a lot of teachers, they're very protected.

Situation Two: One professor in the nursing program would make jokes, inside jokes, to just her clinical . . . all of us were sitting there going, "Okay, we have no idea what you're talking about. This is not relating to us at all." It made me feel like I was not important or something – that I wasn't really part of her class . . . it distracted me and made me not focus on what she was saying.

Another student reflects on a joke told by one of her professors:

This professor had lost a friend in the war in Iraq . . . he made a joke at the president's expense that was pretty, in my opinion, inappropriate . . . I just don't think that that's helpful . . . this particular comment was used at the beginning of class so then it kind of . . . hinders the learning all throughout. And it effected me because then it changed my perception of

that professor . . . for the first half I was a little upset . . . I was focused more on that and debating if I should say something or not.

The students interviewed who were not personally offended by inappropriate humor gave examples of humor that they felt should not be utilized in the classroom. Two students commented on using sarcasm as a form of humor in the classroom, “sarcasm is not always good . . . I typically think that sarcasm does not work in a classroom,” and “I guess when teachers do use like sarcasm in certain ways or just say certain jokes to put a bad spin on them.”

Two students commented on sexual humor in the classroom, (a) “sexual humor is inappropriate, sexual comments that really were out of context or didn’t relate to what we were talking about”; and (b) “I guess sexual content . . . I guess that would be off limits.”

Other impressions of inappropriate humor included; (a) “inappropriate humor to me would be using like racial humor . . . anything that makes one person stand out in a way that they don’t feel comfortable with”; (b) “singling people out”; (c) “when they’re (instructors) not comfortable with that issue . . . they turn it into a joke . . . it’s not necessary . . . then the kids become more focused on that . . . the issue the teacher’s going through with their teaching method as opposed to the content they’re actually teaching”; and (d) “if a teacher is making jokes that are inappropriate that people can be offended.”

Other Findings

There were two other important findings in this study. Each was expressed by multiple students. These findings do not constitute a theme but are noteworthy and will be discussed here.

When describing humor experiences in the classroom, the students voiced many mediums that they had seen utilized that incorporated humor into their lessons.

Following is a list of humor related tactics that students have repeatedly seen utilized in their classrooms: (a) storytelling, jokes, and puns; (b) skits and costumes; (c) cartoons and humorous Power Point animations; (d) video clips and U-tube; (e) sarcasm; and (f) humorous test questions. Of the various methods of incorporating humor into the classroom, only the use of sarcasm had any negative connotation associated with it.

The second finding was related to why the students thought humor was not utilized more in the classroom by faculty. Five of the students felt that when humor was not utilized it was because the faculty did not have the right personality to use it effectively; (a) “in general, people have different personalities . . . maybe they just don’t know how to incorporate it . . . just kind of exploring different teaching would probably work”; (b) “maybe they’re afraid they’ll get ridiculed . . . maybe it’s just not their personality. Some people don’t have a humorous personality and that’s just how they are”; (c) “some teachers are just not humorous . . . now we’re getting younger and newer teachers and they learn that in school now, some of them, to use it”; (d) “I think it has to go with who the professor’s personality is, whether they’re like that, what humor they like”; and (e) “some professors do not have that personality: they won’t have it and that’s just not going to happen.”

Other reasons for not incorporating humor into the classroom listed by students were: (a) professors felt it did not represent a professional appearance, (b) professors were afraid of minimizing their role, (c) professors don’t want to get too personal with

their students, and (e) professors were never taught how to teach with humor so therefore they don't use it.

Discussion of Results

Giorgi's (1985) method of phenomenology focuses on the outcomes of the description of the meaning of an experience. This is often through the identification of essential themes and searching for common patterns shared by particular instances. The goal of nursing research guided by this method is to offer an opportunity to describe and clarify phenomena important to practice, education, and research (Buck, 2007).

In this study, participants described their experiences with humor in the classroom and the study results were analyzed using Giorgi's (1985) method of phenomenology. The analyzed results were then examined and compared to the principles of humanistic learning theory. The results of the study support the principles that emotions can have influences on the learning process and that interpersonal relations are a concern for nursing students. Students expressed their desire to have classroom experiences that help them perceive, create, feel, and wonder and to have a classroom atmosphere where environmental conditions facilitate learning.

Summary

In this chapter, the results of the study were presented. The four main themes that emerged were presented. They were; (a) recall and retention, (b) interpersonal relations, (c) content and non-content related humor, and (d) inappropriate humor. These

themes came from rich narrative data that was received from 10 nursing student interviews.

In the following chapter the study summary, conclusions, and recommendations for further research will be presented.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate nursing students' experiences of humor in the classroom. In this chapter, a summary of the findings is provided. Conclusions and implications for nursing education and research are presented.

Summary

Humor serves to facilitate human interaction and is viewed as a powerful communication tool. This is one rationale for including humor in nursing education. Listening to the perceptions and experiences of nursing students has provided insight into the perceived benefits and pitfalls of incorporating humor into the nursing classroom.

A descriptive, qualitative design was used in this study to examine undergraduate nursing students' experiences of humor in the classroom. A philosophy based on phenomenology and a qualitative approach to discovery guided data collection and analysis. The principles of the Humanistic Learning Theory provided the theoretical framework for this study. In the Humanistic Learning Theory, the humanistic philosophy of teaching and learning enhances personal growth in students by identifying environmental conditions necessary to facilitate learning (Pine & Boy, 1997).

Humanistic learning theory was appropriate for this study as it emphasizes the importance of how the individual's whole being reacts and interacts with the

environment, as the learner perceives it and great emphasis is placed on immediate subjective experience rather than on prior learning.

In this study, 10 participants, who met sampling criteria, were chosen from a 4-year university in Midwestern Wisconsin, and contacted by the researcher. The researcher sought to gain insight and understanding into the experiences of students who had witnessed humor being used in the classroom. A semi-structured interview process was used with dialogue occurring between the researcher and participant throughout the interview process to assure that each participant had an opportunity to respond to all topical areas.

Four main themes emerged from the audio-taped interviews; (a) recall and retention, (b) interpersonal relations, (c) content and non-content related humor, and (d) inappropriate humor.

The first theme, recall and retention, was supported by all 10 of the participants. Participants cited multiple mechanisms for utilizing humor in this capacity such as; skits, costumes, and demonstrations that incorporated humorous components. Participants were able to give concrete examples of test related questions and concept knowledge that they felt they retained in part due to the humorous way in which it was presented.

The second theme, interpersonal relations, was addressed in a multitude of ways throughout all 10 of the interview transcripts. The consensus was that students saw effective use of appropriate humor as helping to bridge a gap between educator and students. Humor can be used to connect the two as human beings, not as superior and subordinate. Students also reported feeling more comfortable in a classroom setting with

an instructor who utilized humor then one who did not. Perhaps more significant was the students perception of the approachability of educators who do not use humor in their classroom. Multiple students described situations in which they would much prefer having to ask an educator for help if they had witnessed the educator using humor. Non-humorous educators were seen as intimidating, stern and disconnected from their classes.

The third theme described instances of content and non-content related humor and which the students saw as more beneficial. Eight of the students stated that they have seen content related humor in their classrooms more often then that of non-content related humor. Two students felt they have witnessed non-content related humor more often then content related humor, and one student did not directly answer the question.

The students who reflected on content related humor unanimously agreed that this type of humor is both appropriate for the classroom and useful in the retention of concepts. To use humor competently, the students felt that the humor must help them achieve their goal of learning and retaining the material and do so without offending students. Students felt that content related humor helped make the material more memorable while non-content humor helped ease anxiety and reduce stress.

Non-content related humor was viewed as positive by all students as long as it was short in duration and did not distract too much from the task at hand. Students appreciated non-content humor that quickly helped to lighten the mood or to refresh the class but non-content humor that took to much class time or was completely out of context was viewed as negative and a learning distraction.

The fourth theme that emerged was inappropriate humor. Three of the students described situations in which they felt personally offended by inappropriate humor in the classroom and the other seven students offered examples of what they perceived to be inappropriate humor. The most frequently cited forms of inappropriate humor for the classroom were; (a) sexual innuendos or jokes, (b) racial jokes, slurs, or stereotyping, (c) political humor, (d) sarcasm, and (e) humor that singled out any person or group of persons.

The detrimental effects attributed to inappropriate humor in the classroom included; (a) decreased trust and respect for the educator, (b) embarrassment and isolation for the student, (c) distraction from learning, and (d) anger. An observation worth noting is that these detrimental effects seem to have long lasting implications for students who remember the event long after it has occurred.

Conclusions

In this study to examine undergraduate nursing students' experiences of humor in the classroom, the interview technique and questions facilitated participant disclosure and the discovery of common experiences. The following conclusions are based on these on the results of this study:

1. Baccalaureate nursing students in Wisconsin believe that humor in the classroom enhances the learning process.
2. Nursing students in Wisconsin believe that humor should be incorporated more often into the nursing curriculum.

3. Humor has a positive impact on content recall and retention when the humor is content related.
4. The use of appropriate humor can facilitate a more relaxed atmosphere by relieving stress and providing a cognitive break.
5. Using humor in the classroom strengthens the interpersonal relations between faculty and student.

Implications

Nursing Education

The findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature that suggests that humor is multifunctional and positively received by students in the educational setting. The educator who acts as a facilitator utilizing humor as a component of humanistic learning theory is seen as a provider of resources and someone who shares both knowledge and feelings with the learners. The use of humor and its positive connotations for students helps the educator create a supportive educational environment, which provides a safe basis for learning. Humor can help provide meaningful interactions between student and educator by decreasing anxiety and apprehension and increasing growth and the development of critical thinking.

The positive findings in this study point to humor's usefulness to nurse educators and are an important consideration for faculty. Humor can be used to motivate, provoke thinking, and to reinforce knowledge. The study findings also show that in student's experiences, content related humor aids in the recall and retention of concepts being

taught. Educators can use this knowledge to investigate and implement new ways to incorporate humor as an adjunct learning tool to help students grasp difficult or tedious subject matter.

Nurse educators have an obligation to their students not only to impart knowledge but also to act as role models for teaching and learning. Nursing prides itself on the holistic care that it offers patients and this same concept should apply to how nurse educators interact with their students. Students should be learning in an environment where they feel free to express themselves and have open, caring relationships with their educators. Educators can strive to develop effective teaching characteristics and a learning environment for the class that is compatible with humor.

Nursing Research

The results of this study have provided insight into the experiences of undergraduate nursing students in relation to humor in the classroom. Recommendations for further research include:

1. Replication of this study with a larger and more culturally diverse student population.
2. Investigate ways to best incorporate humor related content into nursing curriculums.
3. Investigate impediments relating to the incorporation of humor in the classroom by faculty.
4. Assess the knowledge of nurse educators regarding the perceived positive benefits of utilizing humor in the classroom.

5. How effective is humor in increasing content retention.

Summary

This chapter provided a summary of the current study. Conclusions that were drawn from the results of the study were also discussed. Implications for nursing education were provided along with recommendations for further studies.

APPENDIX A

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

Date: _____

Age: _____

Race: _____

Sex: _____

Educational Level: _____

Is your current grade point above a 3.0 yes____ no ____?

Have you ever witnessed humor used in the classroom? _____

Contact Information: _____

APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Describe an experience when humor was utilized in the classroom in a positive manner.
2. Describe an experience when humor was used in the classroom in a negative manner.
3. Describe an event in which humor did or did not facilitate in your learning and why.
4. Describe humor as you have experienced it in the classroom.

APPENDIX C

Institutional Review Board Approval



October 16, 2007

Ms. Tracy Ahern
54495 Better Dr.
North Freedom, WI 53951

Dear Ms. Ahern:

On behalf of the UW Oshkosh Institutional Review Board for Protection of Human Participants (IRB), I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved for the following research: Student's Perceptions of Humor and How it Effects Learning.

Your research has been categorized as NON-EXEMPT, which means it is subject to compliance with federal regulations and University policy regarding the use of human participants as described in the IRB application material. Your protocol is approved for a period of 12 months from the date of this letter. A new application must be submitted to continue this research beyond the period of approval. In addition, you must retain all records relating to this research for at least three years after the project's completion.

Please note that it is the principal investigator's responsibility to promptly report to the IRB Committee any changes in the research project, whether these changes occur prior to undertaking, or during the research. In addition, if harm or discomfort to anyone becomes apparent during the research, the principal investigator must contact the IRB Committee Chairperson. Harm or discomfort includes, but is not limited to, adverse reactions to psychology experiments, biologics, radioisotopes, labeled drugs, or to medical or other devices used. Please contact me if you have any questions (P: 920/424-7172 or e-mail: rauscher@uwosh.edu).

Sincerely,

Dr. Frances Rauscher
Dr. Frances Rauscher
IRB Chair

cc: Leona Dempsey
1251

APPENDIX D
Informational Flyer

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

Informational Flier

Undergraduate nursing students' experiences of humor in the classroom.

I am a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. I am enrolled in a nurse educator program, and am conducting a study to examine undergraduate nursing students' experience of humor in the classroom. Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated, and may improve educators understanding of how the use of deliberate humor can facilitate learning in the classroom.

Once you have agreed to participate in the study, a meeting time and location will be decided upon. All interviews will be conducted in the nursing education building on the University of Oshkosh campus with administrative permission. In a confidential manner, I will be asking you to share your experiences, thoughts, and feelings related to the experiences you have had with humor in classroom. I will be asking for your permission to tape-record our interview, which will be kept anonymous. The interview will be transcribed and analyzed for themes to describe the experiences of humor as it impacts students in the classroom. This information may be shared with you for validation of accuracy. The time required for participation in this study will depend on the amount of information that you are able and willing to share relating to your experiences.

I do not anticipate that this study will present any medical or social risk to you, other than the inconvenience of the time involved. Although you may not benefit directly from this study, your experiences may help draw attention to new teaching techniques that could benefit the educational experiences for students such as yourself.

The data collected in this study will be kept confidential. If the results of this study would be submitted for publication, your identity would be kept anonymous and no information would be provided that could reveal your identity.

You may withdraw from this study at any time, if you so chose, without a penalty. The information collected from you up to that point would be destroyed at your request. Once the study is completed, I would be happy to give you the results, if you so desire. If you are willing to participate, or if you have any questions, please contact me by March 25th, 2008.

Tracy Ahern

delmot11@uwosh.edu (preferred contact method) (608)522-3334

College of Nursing, UW Oshkosh

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT FORM AUDIO USE

As part of this research project, I will be making an audiotape recording of you during your participation in the interview. Please indicate what uses of this audiotape you are willing to consent to by initialing below. You are free to initial any number of spaces from zero to all of the spaces, and your response will in no way affect your credit for participating. I will only use the audiotape in the ways that you agree to. In any use of this audiotape, your name would not be identified. If you do not initial any of the spaces below, the audiotape will be destroyed.

Please indicate the type of informed consent

____ Audiotape

(AS APPLICABLE)

☐ **The audiotape can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.**

Please initial: _____

☐ **The audiotape can be used for scientific publications.**

Please initial: _____

I have read the above description and give my consent for the use of the audiotape as indicated above.

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

REFERENCES

- Aylor, B., & Oplinger, P. (2003). Out-of-class communication and student perceptions of instructor humor orientation and socio-communicative style. *Communication Education, 52*, 122-134.
- Beck, C.K., Rawlins, R.P., & Williams, S.R. (1993) *Mental health-psychiatric nursing: a holistic approach* (3rd ed.). St. Lois: Mosby.
- Beeman, W. (2000). Linguistic lexicon for the millenium. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, 9:2*.
- Berk, R. (1998). *Professors are from Mars, students are from Snickers*. Madison, WI: Mendota Press.
- Berk, R. (2000). Does humor in course tests reduce anxiety and improve performance? *College Teaching, 48*, 151-8.
- Bryant, J., & Zillman, D. (1989). Using humor to promote learning in the classroom. *Journal of Children in Contemporary Society, 20*, 49-77.
- Buck, Wendy (2007). Perceptions and experiences of elders and health care providers regarding pain management. Clinical Paper, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh.
- Buxman, K., & LeMoine, A. (Eds.), *Nursing perspectives on humor* (51-86). New York: Power Publications.
- Cannella, K., Missroon, S., & Opitz, (1995). Humor: An educational strategy. Filmore, R., (1991). A Comparison of certain literary elements found in the childrens' and

teachers' choice awards for the middle grades for the years 1985, 1986, and 1987.

Doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa.

Cornett, C., E. (1986). Why get serious about humor? In *Learning through laughter; humor in the classroom*. Bloomington, IN; Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

Frymier, B., & Houser, M.L. (2000). The teacher-student relationship as an interpersonal relationship. *Communication Education*, 49, 207-219.

Garner, R. L. (2006). Humor in pedagogy: How ha-ha can lead to aha! *College Teaching*, 54, 177-180.

Giorgi, A. (1985). *Phenomenology and psychological research*. Pittsburg, PA: Duquesene University Press.

Glenn, R. (2002). Brain research: Practical applications for the classroom. *Teaching for Excellence*, 21 (6): 1-2.

Hayden-Miles, M. (2002). Humor in clinical nursing. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 41 (9): 420-23.

Kher, N., Molstad, S., & Donahue, R. (1999). Using humor in the college classroom to enhance teaching effectiveness in "dread courses." *College Student Journal* 33 (3): 400-06.

McEwen, M., & Wills, E. (2007). *Theoretical Basis for Nursing* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkens.

Ogletree, E. (1974). Rudolf Steiner: unknown educator. *The Elementary School Journal*, 74, 334-351.

- Olsson, H., Kook, M., Sorenson, S., & Koch, M. (2000) Nursing and humor: an exploratory study in Sweden. *Vard I Norden*, 1, 42-45.
- Olsson, H., Backe, H., Sorenson, S., & Kock, M. (2002). The essence of humor and its effects and functions: a qualitative study. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 10, 21-8.
- Pierson, P., & Bredeson, P., V. (1993). It's not just a laughing matter: school principals' use of humor in interpersonal communications with teenagers. *Journal of School Leadership*, 3, 522.
- Pine, G. J., & Boy, A. V. (1997). *Learner centered teaching: A humanistic view*. Denver, CO: Love.
- Polit, D. & Beck, C. (2004). *Nursing Research: Principles and Methods* (7th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkens.
- Polit, D. & Hungler, B., P. (1999). *Nursing research, principles and methods*, (6th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Co.
- Quinn, F. M. (1995). *The Principles and Practice of Nurse Education* (3rd ed). Chapman and Hall: London.
- Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-Centered Therapy*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Rogers, C. R. (1983). *Freedom to learn for the 80's*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Speziale, H., & Carpenter, D. (2007). *Qualitative Research in Nursing: Advancing the Humanistic Imperative* (4th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkens.

- Torok, S. E., McMorris, R. F., & Lin, W. C. (2004). Is humor an appreciated teaching tool? Perceptions of professors' teaching styles and use of humor. *College Teaching*, 52, 14-20.
- Ulloth, J. (2002). The benefits of humor in nursing education. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 41, 476-481.
- Wanzer, M., Frymier, A., Wojtaszczyk, A., and Smith, T. (2006). Appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor by teachers. *Communication Education*, 55, 178-96.
- Watson, C. (1995). Teacher start my orange? *Teaching Education*, 7, 95-6.
- Webster's dictionary and thesaurus* (2001). Springfield, MA: Nichols Publishing Group.
- Ziv, A (1988). Teaching and learning with humor: Experiments and replications. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 6, 37-44.

