

‘Just kidding’: Student perspectives on the use of pedagogical humour

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Humour is considered as involving the communication of multiple incongruous meanings that in some manner evoke amusement. Regarding pedagogy, research has identified significant differences in humour use depending on teaching experience, where experienced professors utilise humour with more frequency and relevance than novice teaching assistants. Thus, examining student perspectives on humour use in terms of seniority and accompanying factors such as age, experience, and expertise would aid Higher Education development, especially in a country like Sri Lanka where education is regarded as a fairly formal, hierarchical process. Extending Instructional Humour Processing Theory, this study investigated student views on pedagogical humour in relation to the lecturer’s age, seniority, experience, and expertise. A sample of 53 students from the Department of English, University of Colombo, answered a questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards the use of humour in courses followed at all Departments of the Faculty of Arts. Confirming the research hypotheses, while many students (n=25:47%), regardless of sociocultural background, viewed senior faculty as more adept at using humour in teaching than juniors, they were more comfortable reciprocating humour (n=17:32%) when the lecturer was relatively junior and closer to them in age. However, students additionally regarded the lecturer’s personality, familiarity with the lecturer, class size and dynamics, and their own seniority in the system, as affecting their perceptions. While all respondents unreservedly endorsed the use of positive pedagogical humour, negative humour in terms of derisive jokes targeted at particular individuals/ groups, irrelevant humour, and prolonged humour to the point of distraction, were criticised. The study offers recommendations for junior faculty to learn strategic employment of instructional humour from senior colleagues, and for senior faculty to improve the effectiveness of their own classroom humour. Such steps would put a powerful pedagogical tool to good use, contributing towards enhancing the tertiary educational experience for teacher and learner alike.

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