
Librarian Attitudes toward Classroom Humor

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While there have been hundreds of articles and books written on humor in a classroom setting,¹ only one book and a handful of articles have been written about humor in library instruction or information literacy. These resources are largely either best practices articles, or reviews of the general education literature re-contextualized for librarians. Little research has been done specifically on humor and bibliographic instruction and no published study has focused exclusively on it. Yet humor is a standard engagement strategy that is routinely deployed in the classroom. Perhaps because humor is seen as relative and intangible, or perhaps even because it might be considered unprofessional, this aspect of librarian teaching receives little scholarly attention. Librarian instructors face special challenges in that they often work in “one shot” or limited contact situations where there is little chance to build rapport. Often librarians are also working blind regarding the culture and tone of the classes they visit. It is therefore all the more important that librarians have a strong, reflective teaching ethos and style. In a first step toward resolving the deficit of formal resources this study looks at how instruction librarians feel about humor in the classroom and what they feel are the benefits and drawbacks. As active practitioners, instruction librarians are well situated to comment on this elusive tool for teaching information literacy.

READING THE FUNNY PAGES

Literally, the book on the subject is *Humor and Information Literacy: Practical Techniques for Library Instruction*.² The authors aver, “An instruction librarian who hopes to be successful in the classroom must overcome, or at least mitigate, the problems presented by mobile communications, negative stereotypes, and, when applicable, age differences. While surely there are a variety of solutions to these problems, humor is convenient because it is capable of addressing all of these problems simultaneously” (xx). Essentially they contend “most of the problems facing information literacy are social in nature, so a social solution seems to be in order” (xx), and that even with potential drawbacks humor is ultimately a justifiable means to an end because “students can’t retain what they refuse to pay attention to” (13).

The majority of articles on this topic fall under the category of best practices. In “Using Humor in Library Instruction,”³ Walker makes a case for humor as a means of reducing library anxiety. Walker recommends being “prepared with humor to handle unexpected events” (121). Also, “Using

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humor early on in the presentation establishes rapport between the librarian and the students" (122). He concludes, "Not only does [humor] help to create an effective and positive environment, but it is a source of enjoyment for both the librarian instructor and the students" (125).

Focusing on a very specific area of library instruction, Petry advocates for "Adding Zest to OPAC Instruction: Humor and the Unexpected."⁴ She observes "To some college students, libraries are intimidating, dusty, boring places and librarians are the most humorless, uninteresting people on earth" (76). She describes humor in an instruction setting as multitasking because it wakes up the listeners, establishes a friendly rapport, and helps keep the librarian interested. She sees the OPAC as an excellent tool for humor because "almost any collection will yield some absurd and unusual items" (76). Petry concludes that one of the most important opportunities in bibliographic instruction is forming a positive, professional connection between student and librarian and that humor ensures this and "amplifies other desirable aspects of the learning process" (82).

Illustrating one extreme of utilizing humor in library instruction, Arnsan discusses what might be better described as notable practices in "Libraries, Laughter and Learning: The Rubber Chicken School of Bibliographic Instruction."⁵ He notes the usual benefits of humor in the classroom, including increased alertness, creative thinking, improved comradery and reduced stress (54). "Librarians have worked so hard to convince the academic world that teaching information literacy is an integral part of a general education that we may be taking ourselves too seriously in our quest for respectability" (54). Some examples of his own techniques include introducing the *U.S. Budget in Brief* wrapped in a pair of men's underwear and using a fish prop made out of microfiche (55). He cautions that if you "go too far you'll only be a popular clown and students will be waiting for the punchline instead of the point of the lecture" (57).

In a truly interesting article Trefts and Blakeslee describe their quest to teach themselves to be funnier in "Did You Hear the One about the Boolean Operators? Incorporating Comedy into Library Instruction."⁶ The idea came from realizing that bibliographic instruction is a lot like traffic school, and that comedy traffic schools have been successful in improving the experience of having to learn information that is perceived to be boring in circumstances that are probably less than voluntary. They listened to three different audio courses on comedy, studied Judy Carter's *Stand Up Comedy: The Book*, and ultimately went to a stand-up comedy workshop, where they were informed that they would never be professionally funny but they could still learn to be funnier. Lessons they carried over from their study of comedy included continued practice, not trying to be hip, utilizing humor that you are comfortable with, thinking about the audience, and keeping a comedy journal (373). They conclude, "While content remains the most important part of teaching, if our content can be enhanced through using humor to relay the message, we feel that everyone will benefit, especially the students" (376).

McAdam's "Humor in the Classroom: Implications for the Bibliographic Instruction Librarian" is notable because it is the only article discovered in this literature review that came to a negative conclusion about humor in bibliographic instruction.⁷ Her article is entirely a literature review, and the observations she draws from her reading include that research has shown that "teachers are perceived by students as being more straightforward and honest when they use no humor of any sort" (329). Furthermore, she found that when students have a negative reaction to an instructor's humor the reaction is especially negative when the instructor is a woman: "The implications for a predominantly female profession cannot be ignored" (330). She concludes that the research about the benefits of humor in instruction is contradictory and inconclusive and that serious students and instructors are likely to be "turned off entirely by what they perceive as a sideshow act without substance" (332).

Only two studies of librarian attitudes toward humor in the classroom could be discovered. Humor is one of several elements Marshall evaluates in her paper "What Would Buffy Do? The Use of Popular Culture Examples in Undergraduate Library Instruction."⁸ Her survey respondents reported using humorous media such as Calvin & Hobbes, *The Far Side*, *The Simpsons*, and *Seinfeld* as examples in their library instruction. All of her respondents found these humorous examples to be successful, with 87 percent finding it highly successful. They noted such benefits as getting students' attention and making the research process less intimidating and more fun (9). Nancy Seale Osborne conducted a study of forty-three instruction librarians in the State University of New York system regarding their perceptions of classroom humor and their reasons for employing humor in her report "Librarian Humor in Classroom and Reference." Unfortunately, the actual report could not be discovered, and only the abstract appears to be available. From that, we do know her study found that SUNY instruction librarians were "respectful of the possibilities and power of the use of appropriate humor," feeling that humor made them more approachable, put people at ease, and facilitated relaxation.⁹

METHOD

A brief survey was constructed using the online service Qualtrics. A qualitative approach was used because this project was investigating the subjective experiences and reactions of instruction librarians. Basic demographic information was requested, as well as responses regarding perceptions of benefits and drawback of humor in library instruction and opinions on appropriate and inappropriate humor in the classroom. Because this research was viewed as a preliminary step, essentially determining whether there is even an issue to research, a convenience sample was deemed sufficient. An email call for participation was sent to the Idaho Library Association electronic discussion list (<http://lists.ala.org/www/info/libidaho>), the ALA Information

Table 1. What type of library do you work in?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	K-12	13	24
2	Public	8	15
3	Academic	29	53
4	Other	5	9
	Total	55	100

Table 2. How long have you been teaching library skills?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Less than one year	7	13
2	One to five years	20	36
3	Six to ten years	15	27
4	More than ten years	13	24
	Total	55	100

Literacy Instruction electronic discussion list (<http://lists.ala.org/wws/arc/ili-l>), and the subreddit /r/Librarians (www.reddit.com/r/librarians/comments/2vkdnq/survey_of_instruction_librarian_attitudes_towards/). The qualitative answers were then manually parsed into emergent categories by the researcher. This approach would not be practical or desirable for a larger sample, but it was useful here for creating a useful sketch of the responses. Finally, illustrative comments were then pulled for use in this paper.

FINDINGS

Responses were received from librarians working in all types of libraries (table 1) demonstrating the broad interest of this topic. The relatively low response rate from public libraries may reflect that those venues are less likely to have classroom instruction on information literacy. Likewise, librarians at every stage of their career responded, indicating that this topic remains relevant even with experience (see table 2).

Almost universally, the respondents indicated that they use humor in library instruction and that they believe it is appropriate to do so (see table 3 and table 4). Only one respondent indicated that it was inappropriate to use humor.

There were fifty-one responses to the prompt about the benefits of utilizing humor during library instruction (see table 5). Because the respondents were allowed to give a freeform response, many of their answers were counted in multiple categories. Respondents noted that humor creates a more relaxed learning environment and alleviates library anxiety. Some also noted that using humor makes students more engaged and alert. “Humor can be a way of making the material relevant to students and less monotonous. For example, with college students, asking them for synonyms for ‘inebriated’ to demonstrate the usefulness of a database

Table 3. Do you utilize humor in your library instruction sessions?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	53	96
2	No	2	4
	Total	55	100

Table 4. Do you believe it is appropriate to utilize humor in library instruction sessions?

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Yes	54	98
2	No	1	2
	Total	55	100

Table 5. What do you perceive to be the benefits of using humor during library instruction?

Benefit	Response	%
Learners more likely to listen	32	63
Make connection with librarian	24	47
Relaxed learning environment	21	41
More fun for the librarian	4	8
Material more memorable	3	6

thesaurus.” Nearly half the respondents indicated that humor allows the learners to make a human connection with the librarian, which facilitates immediate learning and perhaps makes the librarian seem more approachable in the future. “I like to make jokes or show funny pictures because of the sometimes negative stereotypes of Librarians/Media Specialists. In my case, I took over for a very old crotchety librarian who unfortunately fit that stereotype to a T, even with the teachers. I try to make it very casual and relaxed and fun in here now. We have lots of students come in here now over the past three years, and our checkout stats have practically doubled.” Four people indicated that using humor makes information literacy instruction more fun for the librarian. One offered the additional observation, “I also feel more comfortable—I’m a pretty easy-going person and I make jokes a lot in my usual conversation with people, and I find I do a better job instructing if I can feel like myself.”

There were fifty-one responses to the prompt about the drawbacks of utilizing humor during library instruction (see table 6). Because the respondents were allowed to give a freeform response many of their answers were counted in multiple categories. Across library types, the biggest drawback was the risk that humor will be off-putting or offensive to the learner. “The type of humor must be watched. Too deadpan, sarcastic, or topically inappropriate can be hurtful.” A secondary concern is that, if the attempt at humor fails, the librarian may be perceived as out of touch. “Uh, sometimes

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Table 6. What do you perceive to be the drawbacks of using humor during library instruction?

Drawback	Response	%
Off-putting/Offensive	20	39
Perceived to be out of touch	16	31
Credibility undermined	11	22
Not professional behavior	11	22
No drawbacks	7	14
May cause confusion	3	6
Cause inappropriate behavior	3	6

what I think is funny is not to students, my humor may not be delivered well, or it seems ‘lame’ to students. I’m not a standup comedian.” There is an interesting element to the next two responses, as they were split by library type. Those in K–12 and public library environments were concerned that their credibility with the learners might be undermined. “If the students feel like it is hokey or juvenile they may lose respect for the instructor or not consider their information relevant.” Those working in an academic environment had a parallel concern that using humor would not be perceived as professional behavior by their colleagues. In many ways this seems to be the same concern but with a different audience. If these categories were combined this would actually be the number one concern. Seven respondents indicated that there were no drawbacks. An additional four respondents qualified their responses in other categories by indicating that the risk of using humor was worth the benefits. A small number of respondents indicated that using humor might create confusion in the learners. Another special concern of K–12 librarians was that using humor may cause learners to act out in undesirable ways. “Humour, in promoting openness and a relaxed atmosphere, can also promote chaos—that is, a lessening of respect towards the presenter (i.e., talking out of turn, belligerence) or an undermining of the subject matter.” Unfortunately, this survey echoed what previous researchers have found, that there is also a gender component to the need to protect one’s perception of authority and expertise. “I’m a young woman teaching a technology that is, in general, pretty dominated by men. I worry that if I am not a consummate professional my expertise will be doubted.”

There were forty-six responses to the prompt about appropriate types of humor during library instruction (see table 7). Because the respondents were allowed to give a freeform response, many of their answers were counted in multiple categories. There were a wide variety of responses, and even the most popular response was only given by a quarter of the respondents. This is a reflection of the great effect personality has on teaching style. The most common response was that the humor should be relevant. Not surprisingly funny topics and funny results were a common strategy employed by the respondents. Perhaps surprisingly, puns were just as popular. Twice as many respondents identified

Table 7. What types of humor do you believe are appropriate during library instruction?

Humor Type	Response	%
Relevant	11	24
Puns	9	20
Self-deprecating	9	20
Funny sources/topics	9	20
Silly	7	15
Anecdotes	6	13
G-rated/Politically Correct	5	11
Pop Culture	5	11
Memes	4	9
Sarcasm	4	9
Witticisms	3	7
Jokes	3	7
Topical	2	4
Absurdist	1	2
Accents	1	2
Impersonations	1	2
Physical	1	2

self-deprecating humor as G-rated or politically correct humor, suggesting librarians employing humor may be favoring impact over inoffensiveness. Those who work with children in K–12 or public library settings favored silly humor. “Humor is particularly useful and fun when doing read a louds and story time. If funny books are being read them it is important for the librarian to really ‘get into’ the story and be silly with the book and the students.” Pop culture references were only favored by a minority. “Things that are generally known in pop culture, references to films or media. Doing a database search for ‘african or european swallow airspeed’ often still gets a laugh and humanizes the search so students see it does not have to be stuffy.” Memes, sarcasm, and witticisms were seen as tools for reaching those especially jaded college students. One rogue respondent reported using accents, impersonations, and physical comedy, all identified in the literature as high-risk humor in a classroom setting. “When I teach a class, it’s like a low-key Robin Williams instructing.”

There were forty-seven responses to the prompt about inappropriate types of humor during library instruction (see table 8). Because the respondents were allowed to give a freeform response many of their answers were counted in multiple categories. The most inappropriate humor appears to be targeted humor. That is, humor that attacks, insults or belittles either a person or a group of people. Particularly with the groups of people there were practically as many specific groups cited as respondents (e.g., racist humor, sexist humor, ethnic humor, homophobic humor, etc.). “We’re not cutting edge comedians here- keeping it light is totally acceptable.”

Table 8. What types of humor do you believe are inappropriate during library instruction?

Humor Type	Response	%
Belittling of an individual	17	36
Belittling of a group	16	34
Offensive	12	26
Racy/Bawdy	7	15
Distracting/Too Much	7	15
Too sarcastic/dark	7	15
Slapstick	2	4
Gross out	2	4
Most humor	2	4
Lame puns	1	2
Nothing	1	2

Rather than have a dozen or more one-response categories these responses were grouped together because they are getting at the same underlying point and, at least within this pool of respondents, it is unlikely that anyone would argue that racist humor is inappropriate but sexist humor is appropriate. A quarter of respondents just indicated that any offensive humor is inappropriate. Several highlighted racy/bawdy humor, even specifically mentioning playing off the sexy librarian stereotype. An excessive amount of humor and failing to stop when your humor is not working was also well represented. “I think too much humor, though I am not capable of delivering too much, is also inappropriate. It shouldn’t be a standup comedy hour.” Other undesirable excesses include being too sarcastic and being too physical with one’s humor. Two respondents felt that most humor was inappropriate and one felt there was no such thing as inappropriate humor. Two respondents felt the need to specify gross-out humor in the context of bibliographic instruction, which just raises further questions perhaps best not researched. Ultimately, “Students should still feel like the classroom is a safe space and like the librarian is approachable” and “if you wouldn’t tell the joke to your mother, probably don’t do it.”

Other comments included the following:

I only just started allowing myself to be myself in my library instruction over the past couple of years. I enjoy it so much more, and it seems that my students do too. Not everything works, and that’s okay. I have had students come up to me wanting to talk about memes or famous internet cats, or they’re happy that they knew about something “internet” before their kids did. I really love this connection. I teach a wide age range—from high school to folks in their 50s–60s, and they all seem to appreciate the effort I put in, even if not everything gets the laughs that I expect.

I recently used humor in an LI session that is still being talked about when I went dressed to a

character-themed college English class dressed as a literary character. Caught their attention and they STILL remember me!

When given the chance to expound many of the respondents commented on how using humor in the classroom was a transformative experience for the librarian.

CONCLUSIONS

This study was predicated on the anecdotal assumption that using humor in library instruction was a contentious practice, but this small study found almost universal support for the practice. Of course, personal definitions of humor vary. For some it involves wrapping reference books in undergarments. On the other end of the spectrum one respondent considered comparing a library to a grocery store to be humorous. Librarians in all stages of their careers and at all types of libraries use humor in their instruction. Reasons for using humor include making learners more likely to listen, creating a connection with the librarian, and fostering a relaxed learning environment. To do this these librarians relied on puns, self-deprecation, and funny research topics. They were concerned about their humor being offensive or out of touch and having their credibility undermined, but apparently feel the risks are worth the benefits. These librarians felt that humor targeted at an individual or group is the most inappropriate type of humor in the classroom. Ultimately, these librarians reported that the use of humor improved their teaching and the experience for everyone involved. Instruction librarians, who are often teaching solo and in a vacuum of feedback, can take heart in knowing there are other humorous librarians out there and that humor itself appears to be a beneficial pedagogical strategy. Further studies are needed to discover the attitudes of teaching faculty toward librarian humor, and most importantly student attitudes and the instructional efficacy of librarian humor.

References

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