

Teacher Humor Orientation as a Determiner of Attendance

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Background and Hypotheses

Previous research on improving attendance has focused on the use of extrinsic motivation to raise attendance levels. Wanzer and Frymier (1999) speculated that humor could be a way to boost student morale about class attendance; the current study investigated this speculation.

Humor orientation styles can be divided into four groups: social humor, self-enhancing humor, hostile humor, and self-defeating humor. Social and hostile humor involve humor directed towards the group, while self-enhancing and self-defeating humor involve humor directed towards the individual. While social and self-enhancing humor are positive forms of humor, hostile and self-defeating humor are negative forms of humor (Puhlik-Doris & Martin, 1999, as cited in Saroglou & Scariot, 2002).

Positive humor includes funny stories, funny comments, and positive sarcasm; negative humor includes cruel sarcasm, ethnic humor, and aggressive or hostile humor (Torok et al., 2004). Torok et al. (2004) found that students felt positively about a professor who used positive humor in the classroom.

Rocca (2004) found that professors' connection with students (a trait associated with social humor) has a negative correlation with students' number of missed classes. It was also shown that professors' verbal aggression towards students (a trait associated with hostile humor) has a positive correlation with students' number of missed classes.

It was hypothesized that there would be a significant difference in projected student attendance rates between teachers using positive and negative humor. It was also predicted that an interaction effect between humor valence (positive, negative) and type (group, self) would occur such that social humor teachers would have the highest expected attendance and hostile humor teachers would have the lowest expected attendance.

Method

Participants

46 undergraduate students (15 male, 31 female) volunteered for this study. Age ranged from 18 to 26, with median age 20.

Design

A 2 (valence) x 2 (type) between-subjects factorial experimental design was used. Humor valence was divided into positive and negative humor, and humortype was divided into group or self humor. The dependent variable was likelihood to attend.

Materials

A 3-minute audiotape of a male "professor" giving a lecture on Giftedness was used. The professor used a different humor style each time. All lectures were identical except for two jokes representative of each specific humor style which were placed at the beginning and end of the lecture. An attendance questionnaire, which asked six Likert-type scale questions about the professor (likeability and humor), his class (likelihood of signing up and attending), and participant and professor humor similarity, was also used.

Procedure

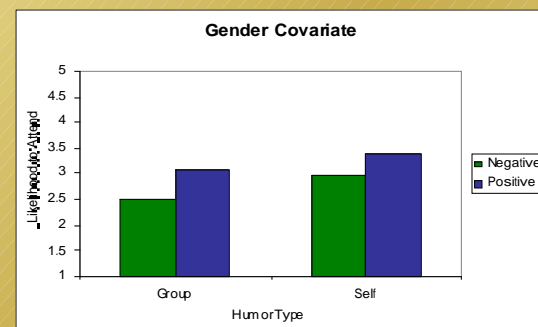
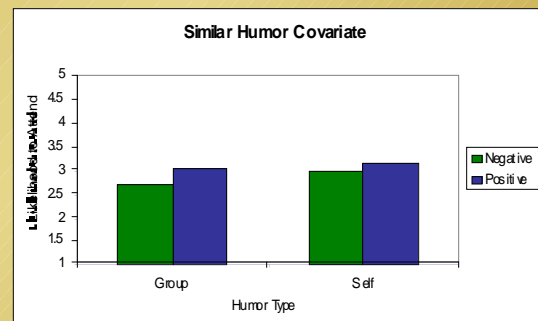
In groups of 1-6 (median 2) participants were given a consent form, listened to one of the four humor styles lectures to which they were randomly assigned, filled out the attendance questionnaire, and were debriefed.

Results

A Cronbach's Alpha was performed on the questions pertaining to professor likeability, likelihood of signing up for class and attending class, and professor humor appeal, Cronbach's Alpha = 0.79. The dependent variable consisted of the average of these questions. Two covariates were used in the analysis: participant and professor similar humor ($r(45) = .63, p < .01$) and gender ($r(45) = -.030, p < .05$). Participants were more likely to attend class when the professor's humor was similar to their own, and males were more likely to attend class than females.

A 2 (type) x 2 (valence) between ANCOVA analysis was first performed using similarity of humor as a covariate. While there were no significant findings, there was an observed trend with humor valence, such that individuals were more likely to attend class when positive humor was used, $F(1) = 2.09, p = .15$. See similar humor graph for plot of all means.

A 2 (type) x 2 (valence) between ANCOVA analysis was next performed using gender as a covariate. There was a significant main effect for valence, $F(1) = 5.13, p = .03$, which indicated that individuals were more likely to go to class when professors use positive (mean = 3.11) rather than negative (mean = 2.86) humor. There was also a trend for humor type, $F(1) = 3.3, p = .07$, such that individuals were more likely to go to class when professors used self rather than group humor. There was no significant interaction effect. See gender graph for a plot of all means.



Discussion

As predicted, humor valence does seem to affect attendance. This supports Puhlik-Doris and Martin's (1999; as cited in Saroglou & Scariot, 2002) as well as Torok et al.'s (2004) finding about negative and positive humor. In general, professors who use positive forms of humor in the class will have better attendance than professors who use negative forms of humor. Students may be more willing to come to class when they do not feel threatened or uncomfortable.

A probable reason why the second hypothesis (positive group humor would have the greatest expected attendance and negative group humor would have the least expected attendance) was not supported lies in the near-significant main effect for humor type, which indicated that teachers using self-directed humor had better expected attendance than teachers using group-directed humor. Perhaps students feel more at ease when humor is not projected at them, regardless of whether the humor is positive or negative.

Future research should focus on the use of both male and female lecturers. Focus should also be paid to better simulating the classroom environment through increasing group "class" size in a single session and the use of visual lecture presentation so students can also see body language delivery of jokes.

If teachers can focus on utilizing positive forms of humor, especially positive humor directed at the self, hopefully they will see a rise in their attendance rates.

References: Rocca, K. (2004). College student attendance: Impact of instructor immediacy and verbal aggression. *Communication Education, 53*, 185-195.
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