

# Humor in the Classroom: An Introvert's Perspective and Implementation

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*Being humorous in the classroom seems particularly challenging to an introvert who needs time alone and is usually not perceived as outgoing. We offer the experience of an introverted finance faculty member on using humor in the classroom over the past two decades. We emphasize the weaknesses and strengths of an introvert, and how they shape the humor strategies and attempts of the faculty member. We provide examples of “educational” jokes that the faculty member used in his attempts to make it more interesting in the classroom and to engage students. Student feedback on the attempted humor is overwhelmingly positive.*

*Keywords: humor, finance, introvert*

## INTRODUCTION

If we ask faculty members whether they would like to be humorous in the classroom, most of them likely would answer yes. After all, the society generally perceives people who are humorous as easier to get along with and casts a positive light on them (e.g., Wanzer et al., 1996). Humor in the classroom setting could also bring psychological and social benefits to students and the instructor, and have positive effects on student learning, including improved learning environment, instructor evaluation, motivation to learn, and enjoyment of the course (see Lei et al., 2010, and Banas et al., 2011, for reviews). More recently, Hackathorn et al. (2011) find that humor improves student knowledge and comprehension. Suzuki and Heath (2014) show that humorous relevant examples enhance student recognition performance on course material. Goodboy et al. (2015) document that instructor humor improves students' cognitive learning, extra effort, participation, and out-of-class communication, regardless of whether students are learning-oriented or grade-oriented.

On the other hand, do all faculty members have the same talent or skill to be humorous in the classroom? The answer is most likely no. Being humorous in the classroom seems particularly challenging to an introvert. An introvert, in contrast to an extrovert who is generally outgoing and easy to get along with, is an individual who “feel[s] more comfortable focusing on their inner thoughts and ideas, rather than what’s happening externally. They enjoy spending time with just one or two people, rather than large groups or crowds” (WebMD, 2023). Ziv (1984) characterizes an introvert as being “usually quiet and rather closed in himself, preferring books to people and shying away from social contact other than with close friends” (p. 116), and estimates that 40% of the population are more of an introvert than of an extrovert to various

degrees (p.119–120). As the first study linking a unique personality to the actual use of humor in the classroom, and unlike most related studies that use survey or interview methods, this paper contributes to the literature by offering the first-person experience of an introverted finance faculty member on using humor in the classroom over the past two decades.

## WHAT IS HUMOR?

Among the definitions provided by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, humor is “that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous: a funny or amusing quality,” “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous: the ability to be funny or to be amused by things that are funny,” or “something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Meyer (2000) posits that humor serves the functions of (1) Identification (“to build support by identifying communicators with their audience, enhancing speaker credibility, and building group cohesiveness”), (2) Clarification (“to encapsulate their view into memorable phrases or short anecdotes, resulting in the classification of issues or positions”), (3) Enforcement (“to enforce norms dedicatedly by leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience”), and (4) Differentiation (“contrasting themselves with their opponents, their views with an opponent’s view, their own social group with other’s and so on”), although in the classroom setting it seems that the primary functions of humor would be for identification and/or clarification.

Wanzer et al. (2006) classify appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor in the classroom using student responses. Appropriate humor includes (1) related humor (“humor strategies or behaviors linked to course material”), (2) humor unrelated to course material, (3) self-disparaging humor, and (4) unintentional humor. Inappropriate humor includes (1) disparaging humor: targeting students (“either students as a group or individual students”), (2) disparaging humor: targeting others (“responses that disparaged other nonstudent groups based on sex, race, religion or sexual orientation”), (3) offensive humor, and (4) self-disparaging humor. The student responses in Wanzer et al. (2006) suggest in particular that self-disparaging humor could be either appropriate or inappropriate, depending on the context.

Bakar (2019) defines and classifies appropriate and relevant humor using interviews with expert teachers and students. Specifically, appropriate humor (1) is relevant humor, (2) happens at a suitable time and in a suitable manner, and (3) enhances teachers’ credibility. Inappropriate humor is disrespectful humor. Relevant humor (1) is related to the learning content, and (2) is related to daily experiences in life. Irrelevant humor is humor that students do not understand. Those different definitions on what appropriate and/or relevant humor is collectively suggest that instructors should be mindful in their uses of humor to avoid unintended consequences (e.g., from hurting students’ feelings to losing one’s job; see Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p. 130–134 and p. 138–139 for specific examples).

## THE CHALLENGES FACED BY AN INTROVERT

Following Deiter (2000), the rest of this paper based on personal experience is written in first person.

There was one time during my conversation with a faculty member about being an introvert, the faculty member responded: “I am an introvert, too. After a day’s classes I also enjoyed sitting alone in the living room watching TV.” In another case, my department chair and college dean were very surprised when I told them that, for student recruiting events, I would be more comfortable doing the public talk on stage than doing the small talks with potential students and their parents. They assume that most people resist doing public talks more than doing small talks, which is not the case for me (i.e., small talks wear me out). Similar experience leads me to believe that there are at least some people who do not understand what an introvert faces and feels. There might also be the misconception that someone being a 60% (40%) introvert (extrovert) is the same as someone being a 90% (10%) introvert (extrovert).

Bernstein (2015) provides a reference list on what characterizes an introvert as follows, which I find rather accurate:

(1) *Careful thinkers who look before they leap,*

- (2) *Usually only speak when they have something to say, after they've had a chance to process information internally,*
- (3) *Comfort with independent thought and action,*
- (4) *Feeling at their most alive and most energized in quieter situations,*
- (5) *Need solitude to balance out social time,*
- (6) *Active inner life, imagination and a strong creative streak,*
- (7) *Steady, balanced presence during turbulent times,*
- (8) *Sharp observation skills,*
- (9) *Capacity for active listening and connecting with people on an intimate level,*
- (10) *Willing to put other people and their vision in the spotlight, and*
- (11) *Desire for focus and to develop a depth of understanding/mastery over a topic.*

Hellman (2007) suggests that being oneself is the first step toward using humor in the classroom. Smith and Wortley (2017) emphasize that to use humor effectively, instructors should be authentic and play to their natural personalities and strengths. Of the qualities of an introvert in the above list, I find items (4) and (5) to be the most significant weaknesses for me as a teaching faculty member. The need for time alone to recharge in a quiet environment might create the appearance of being cold, isolated, or even arrogant. The most significant strengths are items (1) and (8), the ability to process information as a careful thinker, and the ability to observe surroundings. Those abilities allow me to use my observation and experience as the basis to be humorous in the classroom.

## EXAMPLES OF “EDUCATIONAL” JOKES

Most of my attempts to be humorous in the classroom are by using my so-called “educational” jokes in class, usually as “opening jokes” but sometimes in “spontaneous humor” (Berk, 1996). Berk (1996) uses opening jokes at the beginning of class for the following three purposes: (1) “to motivate students to be on time or else they will miss the joke,” (2) “to serve as a release valve for the stress, tension, anxiety, and negative baggage students may bring into class,” and (3) “to trigger a fun attitude toward learning and the content to follow.” In addition to those purposes, I use the opening jokes because I would rather have students who inevitably come to class late miss my jokes than miss my lecture on the course material.

My “educational” jokes are typically based on what I observe or experience, and they usually have implications to students. The implications might be related to their daily lives, their behavior as students, or other aspects that I think would be good for students to know. There are also certain topics that I do not touch in my humor attempts, which include race, color, religion, sex (including gender identity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy), national origin, age, disability, and genetic information (i.e., factors associated with discrimination as identified in U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2023). I avoid those topics and anything that has a divide in the society (e.g., political issues) because of potential controversies.

As a finance faculty member, I also try to identify “educational” jokes directly related to the finance discipline, but those are few and far between. Typically what I use as “educational” jokes in finance are instances in which market efficiency appears to be violated, or in which securities appear to be mispriced, as later examples would show. Some people might argue that the “educational” jokes unrelated to the course content are irrelevant. For instance, Garner (2006) finds that content-related humor helps student recall and retention of course material, and improves student evaluations of course and instructor. Wanzer et al. (2010) hypothesize and find that humor related to instructional content enhances students’ motivation and ability to process information, but unrelated humor does not. Being at a liberal arts university aiming to shape the whole person, I am less concerned about the “educational” jokes not directly related to the finance discipline, as long as they have some educational implications. Additionally, Berk (1996) argues that incorporating both content-specific and generic humor allows for greater flexibility to an instructor. Bolkan and Goodboy (2015), in reexamining the Instructional Humor Processing Theory proposed by Wanzer et al. (2010) to explain the channels through which instructor humor affects student learning, find that the positive effect of instructor humor on student learning is more consistent with the creation of a positive learning environment than with affecting students’ concentration and information processing. Bolkan et al.

(2018) further recommend the use of contiguous humor to create a positive learning environment and caution against humor integrated with course material that might distract students from core concepts. I have also learned to tell my students upfront that “I am going to tell you an education joke” before I actually tell the joke. This helps students recognize the incongruity in the joke before they perceive the humor in it (Wanzer et al., 2010). It also preempts a problem that Alatalo and Poutiainen (2016) point out: “The funny thing was that it wasn’t funny at all!”

### **Observation/Experience-Based Jokes**

The following are examples of what I have shared with students in class:

*When students fall asleep in class (yes, it happened!):*

Me in class: “I don’t know that my voice is so soothing that people can fall asleep with.”  
(Implication: Wake up!)

*When it rained:*

Me in class: “Before I entered into the college building, I was in the parking lot and looked around. I was amazed that some of you were so bold. You drove in the rain with bald tires!” (Implication: Check your tire treads before it becomes dangerous to drive.)

*There was one time I went to the restroom and left my office door open. I returned to find a student standing right next to my desk deep in the office.*

Me in class after explaining the situation: “If my office door is open but you don’t see me, I assure you that I am not hiding under my desk.” (Implication: Students should not enter a faculty member’s office without permission.)

*There was one time I was in a Walmart parking lot returning my cart back to its collection point. I saw a stranger walking towards me and then giving me a dirty look. I was puzzled and started to process what just happened. I remembered I heard something, which, after a few seconds of thought, was “May I have your cart?”*

Me in class: “Could you hear something while hearing nothing?” After students answer yes or no, I explain the situation. (Implication: Students need to pay attention to our lecture in class.)

### **Finance-Related Jokes**

The following are two examples related to the finance discipline:

*Market Inefficiency*

On August 15, 2023, VinFast Auto Ltd. (Symbol: VFS), an electric vehicle (EV) company based in Vietnam that sold about 7,400 EVs in 2022 (Nguyen, 2023), became publicly traded on Nasdaq through a reverse merger with a special purpose acquisition company. The share price opened at \$22.00. On August 28, 2023, the price reached an intraday high of \$93.00, rendering the company two times more valuable than both Ford Motor Company (F) and General Motors Company (GM) combined. On August 30, 2023, the performance of the stock was shown in class as a joke when the share price was around \$39.00. By the time we looked at the stock again on September 6, 2023, the share price was less than \$25.00. (Implication: Investors sometimes do strange things, and that a limited float could contribute to drastic share price changes when the demand fluctuates.)

*Mispriced Securities*

In April 2014, Google Inc., later restructured to become Alphabet Inc., did a stock split such that its Class A shareholders receive one Class C share (Symbol: GOOG) in addition to each Class A share (GOOGL) they hold. Although Class A shares and Class C shares have the same cash flow rights, Class A shares have the voting rights (one share one vote), and Class C shares do not. Given that the trading volume

in Class A shares is typically larger than the trading volume in Class C shares, i.e., Class A shares have better liquidity, and that the voting rights should have a nonnegative value, the price of Class A shares should not be lower than the price of Class C shares. It was indeed the case from 2014 to 2017. Starting in 2018, however, there were trading days in which Class C shares closed at a higher price than Class A shares. The percentage of those trading days in 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 (until the end of August 2023) are 2.30%, 22.61%, 75.95%, 96.17%, 88.85%, and 100%, respectively. (Implication: Investors sometimes do strange things, and that the non-convertibility between those two share classes might have limited arbitrage activities in restoring the pricing relation.)

## **WHAT DOES A STUDENT REMEMBER AFTER 14 YEARS? THE ANECDOTAL YET DEFINITIVE EVIDENCE**

In Fall 2021, a student who took one of my courses in Fall 2007 contacted the college looking for the original course syllabus for transferring purposes. The student eventually reached me, and I emailed him the PDF file of the original syllabus. In my email I stated: “Yes. It was me. The syllabus for the particular course in Fall 2007, the semester you took the course, is attached. I still have the record that you earned an excellent semester grade in that course.” The student replied: “Thank you so much! I remember you advising us to buy gold bars. Wish I could have bought a few back then.” In Fall 2007, the price of gold per troy ounce fluctuated between \$670 and \$800. By Fall 2021, the spot price of gold was around \$1,950 per troy ounce.

I do not remember who the student was; neither did I have any contact with the student after Fall 2007. I know that the student had an A semester grade because I keep my course records in electronic files, and I looked the information up before I replied to the student. I also know with certainty that I did not “advise us [students] to buy gold bars.” Specifically, being a finance faculty member, I never give advice on what to buy or what to sell (i.e., if I can predict where the market is going, I would not be teaching). What the student remembered after 14 years, instead, is one of my “educational” jokes, or a story I shared with the class in Fall 2007. The story goes as follows.

In early 2005, I was trying to buy pure (24K) gold in bars or coins online. There was no particular reason why I wanted to buy gold; I just like it (e.g., some people may prefer diamond). I found a website that would allow an individual to buy gold bars and gold coins. The only problem is that there was a minimum purchase of 10 troy ounces. At that time the price of gold was around \$400 to \$450 per troy ounce, which was already much higher than the \$250 to \$300 range that I remembered from late 1990’s. Eventually I did not buy any gold at that time because the price was much higher than I remembered, and because I did not have \$4,500 that I could spend on something that generates nothing other than my enjoyment.

Another student who heard the same story in a finance course in Fall 2008 emailed me in June 2010: “I am not sure if you remember me or not, but I am one of your former students. I have been reading about the market and that gold is at its highest level it has ever been. I can’t help but to chuckle when I think about the stories you used to tell us in class about the time you wanted to buy gold, but did not because it was too expensive. I wanted to also thank you for your work. I credit you for teaching me to be mindful about what is going on in the financial world and how it impacts our daily lives.”

So what does a student remember after 14 years from a course? The evidence suggests that it is the “educational” joke I told in class 14 years ago. I have no idea whether a student still remembers the course content after all those years.

## **STUDENT FEEDBACK**

Am I a humorous person? No, I most certainly am not. Could I make it more interesting in the classroom and engage students to facilitate learning? I think I at least tried by making a conscious effort to bring humor to the classroom. Table 1 reflects the effects of such efforts and shows all the student comments that address my use of humor and jokes in the classroom in two related teaching evaluation questions (i.e., “What

worked well in this course/class?” and “What could be improved in this course/class?”) over the recent five-year period from Fall 2018 to Spring 2023. Some student comments are exactly the same from different course sections (e.g., “His jokes” in response to “What worked well in this course/class?”). The use of this five-year period is to provide a recent sample, and also due to the removal of those two related questions from teaching evaluation starting Fall 2023. More than 75% of my face-to-face course sections from Fall 2018 to Spring 2023 have one or more students voluntarily addressing my use of humor and jokes in the classroom without prompting, although overall less than 10% of all students provide the unprompted comments. The unprompted comments, however, should truly and more accurately reflect student opinions because of no preconditioning or framing.

As Table 1 suggests, there is not one single negative comment associated with my use of humor and jokes in the classroom. Students appear to have enjoyed the “educational” jokes I told them in class and demand more if they had the chance. After all, as I sometimes also tell my students as a joke: “Do you know that it is more difficult for me to think of a joke to tell you than to prepare for the class?” A joke it is; it also reflects what Deiter (2000) concludes: “... if humor is to be used most effectively as a presentation tool, it has to be well-planned and well-thought out.”

**TABLE 1**  
**STUDENT COMMENTS IN TWO TEACHING EVALUATION QUESTIONS RELATED TO**  
**THE USE OF HUMOR AND JOKES IN THE CLASSROOM FROM**  
**FALL 2018 TO SPRING 2023**

What worked well in this course/class?	What could be improved in this course/class?
Jokes!	More jokes!
His jokes.	More jokes please!
Great jokes!	Always more jokes.
Like the jokes.	
He is hilarious.	
Jokes are funny.	
The funny jokes!	
Love your jokes!	
His jokes are funny.	
We enjoyed the jokes.	
His jokes are quite funny.	
I enjoyed Dr. [ ]’s jokes.	
Dr. [ ]’s sense of humor.	
Your jokes worked very well!	
His jokes were amazing. Funny guy.	
Expert knowledge with great humor.	
His humor is amazing! His jokes make my day :D	
Dr. [ ] was awesome and always kept class interesting.	
Loved the class.	

## CONCLUSION

Most faculty members probably wish they could be humorous in the classroom. Not all faculty members have the same talent or skill to do so, however. Especially for an introvert, who needs time alone in a quiet environment to recharge, and who is usually not perceived as outgoing, being humorous in the classroom seems particularly challenging. In this paper we offer the experience of an introverted finance faculty member on using humor in the classroom over the past two decades. The faculty member relies on two

unique strengths of an introvert, the ability to process information, and the ability to observe surroundings, and uses his observation and experience as the basis of his “educational” jokes in the classroom. Although we provide some examples of those “educational” jokes that make it more interesting in the classroom and allow the faculty member to engage students, our goal is not to offer a collection of jokes in this paper. Instead, we aim to provide the examples such that introverted faculty members could use their personal observation and experience to form their own “educational” jokes. We also show that voluntary and unprompted student feedback on the use of such “educational” jokes is overwhelmingly positive.

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