A small joke may go a long way

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Abstract – **This paper reports and analyzes the author's own experiences of implementing a "joke starting" strategy into the lecture format of a given course. The "joke starting" strategy meant that every lecture in the studied course was (jump) started with a small joke. Thus, we investigate one particular approach to consciously use humor in teaching, an area well represented in the literature. The ambition with the "joke starting" strategy was to improve classroom climate, increase student interaction and achieve a better learning experience. The study deals with a single course, which the author taught three times 2002-2004. The "joke starting" strategy was introduced in 2003 and used also in 2004. No other conscious changes were made to the course format or its content during these years. Hence, by investigating course evaluations and grade distributions we can quantitatively measure the overall impact of the "joke starting" strategy on students' perceptions of the course and their learning results. This is complemented with anecdotal evidence from the author regarding the perceptions of changes in the classroom climate and students' interaction levels. The results indicate that the "joke starting" strategy was quite successful. The students' evaluations and the grade distributions improved across the board. Moreover, the anecdotal evidence speaks about a more open and interactive classroom climate. The conclusion from this small empirical study is therefore that a small joke may go a long way.**

Index Terms: Humor, Classroom climate, Immediacy, Deep learning approach, Interaction

I. INTRODUCTION

A few years back I was working at a business school in the United States and attended a pedagogical training course titled "Performance in a Nutshell". The course focused on ways to improve verbal and nonverbal classroom presentation skills. One aspect, which I found particularly interesting, was the ability as a speaker to grab the students' attention at the beginning of a class. Classical ways to accomplish this is the use of startling statistics, telling a story or giving an example, asking a rhetorical question or using humor. Inspired by this I decided to implement some of these ideas in one of the courses I was teaching at the time. More precisely, I focused on the use of humor, and I began to start off every lecture with a small joke. The response I got from the students was very positive, both in terms of improved interaction in the classroom, but also in terms of improved course evaluations. Clearly, I was very happy with this and continued to "joke start" every lecture for the remaining years that I taught the course. After recently attending another pedagogical training course, this time at Lund University

focused on the "Good Lecture", I started to reflect on my experience of "joke starting" lectures. An interesting aspect is that I did not change anything else in the course format during this time. Hence, it may be construed as a controlled empirical experiment where the impact of "joke starting" the lectures can be measured in terms of course evaluations and students' grades. As I found the results rather interesting I decided to write this paper and share my experience with the hope that it may inspire others to see how far a small joke may go in the strive for the "good lecture".

There is a lot of literature on the use of humor in teaching and education. Without an ambition of rendering a complete overview, one can conclude that many researchers argue that humor can be an important tool for creating an open classroom climate ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]). An important aspect of this is that humor can improve teacher immediacy (i.e. psychological availability). Humor may also be used to strengthen the teacher's credibility and image ([2], [8], [10]), to reduce students' fears and anxieties ([2], [3],[5], [6], [7]), to increase student teacher interaction ([2], [4], [5], [7]), and to make the learning environment more enjoyable ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5]).

It is interesting to note that according to, for example, [11], [12] and [13]; an open, interactive, safe and caring classroom environment stimulates deep learning approaches (as defined by [14], [15] and [16]). Consequently, humor can also aid in stimulating deep learning.

However, humor is not necessarily a recipe for success in the classroom. Quite a lot of research points to the fact that using humor in the wrong way can be devastating (see, for example, [2], [17], [18], [19]). This includes humor that may be construed as sick, distasteful, demeaning, racial, sexual, cynical, or discriminating against social groups or individuals. In essence, humor that may offend someone in the audience/class can have a very negative impact on the class. The difficulty is to know the audience well enough to recognize what may be offensive to someone in the class and to avoid that type of humor.

One should be weary that humor is a fuzzy concept which is not so easily defined. A common approach to categorizing humorous behavior is given in [19] where they distinguish between jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, and other humorous content. A joke is defined as "a relatively short prose build-up followed by a punch line". This fits well with the humorous activity studied in this paper.

A distinction between my small empirical study on "joke starting" lectures and the referenced literature is that I only investigate the impact of using a small joke in the beginning of the lecture, not the use of humor throughout the

teaching session. As I in this paper look at the impact that the use of humor may have on students' course evaluations, there is an apparent connection to [19]. The difference is that in their work, single lectures in about 70 different courses were studied. They then measured the correlation between humorous activities, as defined above, and student evaluations of this collection of single lectures. In contrast, we consider a single course over three years and compare the course evaluations and grade distributions with and without the strategy to "joke start" the lectures.

II. DETAILS ABOUT THE STUDIED SITUATION

The course in which I implemented the "joke starting" strategy was an upper level elective undergraduate course in Business Process Design. This means that the students were in their third or fourth year, typically with a profile towards operation management. The course had a fairly quantitative focus on modeling and analyzing process performance as a basis for improving the process design. Topics covered included deterministic and stochastic methods (simple queuing models) for calculating throughput, cycle times and utilizations. An important part of the course was also to work hands on with discrete event simulation models using commercial software.

The time frame for the study is 2002-2004 during which time I taught the course three times. After spending a lot of effort prior to 2002 on developing the course material, I was quite happy with the structure and contents of the course. Thus, the only thing that I consciously changed in the course during the given time frame was that in 2003 and 2004, I "joke started" every lecture. Of course, there are many things in the physical environment that changed over these years, different students, different classrooms, different lecture times etc. However, in my view these differences were rather small (an exception is the class sizes, but this will be discussed further in the analysis) and should not have a major impact on the results. In addition to variations in the physical environment, it is not unlikely that without noticing I changed as a person and as a lecturer over these years as well. However, I do believe that my lecturing stile was rather stable over the three years in question. I used the same lecture material, (power point slides, lecture plans, examples etc.), the number of lectures were the same, I used the same course book and homework examples, the exams were very similar and the simulation project remained the same (only the numerical data changed). I had also over eight years of teaching experience prior to 2002.

Still, there is one thing apart from the "joke-starting" strategy that distinguishes the class in 2003 from the others, and that is the involvement of an FTP (Faculty Teaching Excellence) consultant in one lecture. This meant that this person (a professor with a distinguished teaching record) sat in on one lecture and observed the class. The lecture was also videotaped and after it was finished the FTP consultant administered a survey/teacher evaluation to the students. The reason for this FTP involvement was that I signed up for this activity with the ambition to learn more about my own teaching style, and to get some feedback on how to develop it

further. It was a good experience for me, but it did not lead to any significant changes in my teaching approach with any bearing on this study. However, an often seen side effect of this type of activity, (according to the FTP consultant), is that the course evaluations tend to go up. This could be explained as a sort of Hawthorne effect [20] where the mere observation of the system impacts the results. The potential influence of such an effect needs to be kept in mind when analyzing the results.

Turning to the jokes that were used, my intention was for them to be short and to follow a theme that could be motivated in some way. I decided to build on the fact that I was a foreigner from Sweden, and I framed the jokes as a cultural outlook illustrating the love-hate relationship between Swedes and Norwegians. It follows that all jokes were classical, rather goofy, Norway jokes, unrelated to the course content. I was very careful to point out that the same jokes are told in Norway about Swedes and on neither side of the border is there any malicious intent. No different from when siblings make fun of one another and quarrel in a loving way. I was also very careful when choosing the jokes to make sure they were not distasteful, offensive or demeaning in any way. When searching for these types of jokes on the web, I came to realize that there are a lot of them that are only mean and without any humorous content. I was very careful not to use any of those.

Still, to avoid any negative feelings I occasionally told the jokes from a Norwegian perspective, meaning that the rather stupid goofy character in the joke was a Swede instead of a Norwegian. This was done both times that I taught the course with the "joke starting" strategy.

It turned out that one year I had a Norwegian student in the class. I then checked with him before the first lecture to make sure he would not be uncomfortable with my jokes. He had no objections and found it quite amusing.

I spent a lot of effort in 2003 to find jokes for all lectures. When I taught the course in 2004 I reused most of these jokes, but replaced a few which had not worked out so well the year before. One problem was that a joke that I found quite funny in Swedish did not necessarily turn out to be that funny when I told it in English for students with a different cultural background.

Generally speaking, I am not a talented comedian so I strongly believe that often the students laughed more at my lack of talent for telling jokes, then at the joke itself. However, it is the result that counts. Perhaps the fact that the students saw that I was not very good at telling jokes, but still persisted in an attempt to reach out to them on a personal level was appreciated. Being a bad comedian may even have helped in this respect

III. RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show summary statistics of the official course evaluations (Faculty Course Questionnaire (FCQ)) for the course in 2002, 2003 and 2004. One can see that compared to 2002, the evaluations are much better in 2003 and 2004 when the "joke starting" strategy was used. The decrease in 2004 compared to 2003 may, at least to some

extent, be explained by the FTP involvement in 2003 and the fact that the class size was almost twice as large in 2004 (see Table 1). However, for the purpose of this study it is interesting that the evaluations are still much better in 2004 than 2002, despite a much larger class (32 students 2002 compared to 47 students 2004).
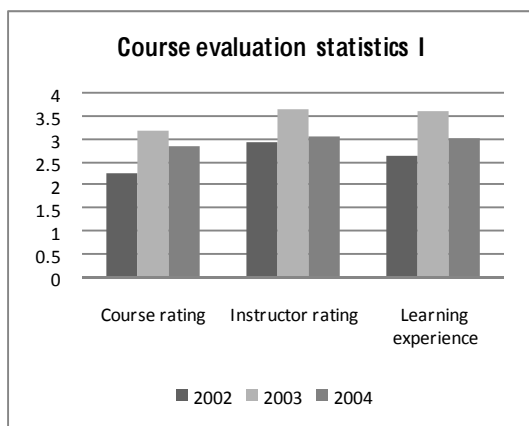

Figure 1. Official course evaluations statistics (FCQ) for the years 2002-2004 regarding Course rating, Instructor rating and Learning experience. Max score = 4.0.
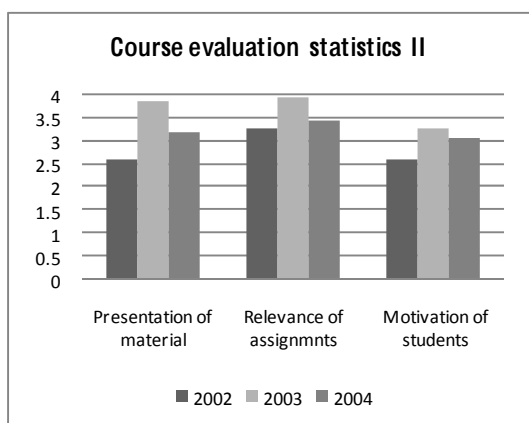

Figure 2. Official course evaluations statistics (FCQ) for the years 2002-2004 regarding items: Presentation of material, relevance of assignments and instructors ability to motivate students. Max score = 4.0.

The results from the course evaluations conform well to my own perception of the differences in the classroom climate over these three classes. The student group in 2003 was by far the most active one on the lectures, closely followed by the one in 2004. There were a few students who really enjoyed the small jokes and even started to send me some of their own jokes of similar type. I felt that the jokes helped to created a very relaxed and open classroom environment, which I firmly believe stimulated the engagement in regular class activities. I think that perhaps the fact that I continuously embarrassed myself by telling bad jokes, made the students feel less afraid to say something in class that may be wrong. I also felt that the jokes helped me to connect to the students on a personal level, bridging the gap between professor and student and improving my immediacy as a teacher. I am guessing that the positive impact of my "joke starting" strategy also have to do

with the fact that it was something new for the students. As far as I know none of my colleagues at the time did anything similar. If all of them had "joke started" their lectures the impact for me to do it may have been much less. As it now was, I think it had a positive effect on my image as a professor.

Comparing 2003 with 2004, I think the larger group (47 compared to 24) made a big difference. The classroom climate was still (in my opinion) very good and I believe that for many of the students the jokes had the same positive effect as the year before. But the interaction level across the entire group was lower.

To investigate if the "joke starting "strategy had an impact on the students' learning in the course, not just their ratings of the course, Table 1 shows some grade statistics for the three classes in question. The overall Grade Point Average (GPA) is higher for the "joke started" classes in 2003 and 2004, which indicates that the students on average did learn more. Moreover, the distributions of grades A, B, and C shows that there were many more A's in 2003 and 2004 than in 2002. This may be seen as an indication that more students used a deep learning approach in the classes that were "joke started". This conjecture is supported by the fact that the exams, homework and projects were very similar across these years. The exams consisted of a mix of essay questions and problem solving questions. They were designed so that in order to get an A you were forced to apply the knowledge you had gained, so a mere regurgitation of memorized facts would not suffice. Hence, it should not be possible to attain an A using a distinct surface approach to learning.

Clearly, the use of class grades to assess differences in student learning is debatable. They are not completely objective and may not capture the actual learning outcome. In this particular case there were also directives for each course regarding a recommended span for the class GPA. This suggests that without that normalizing restriction, the differences between classes may have been bigger. Nevertheless, I think that the grade statistics in Table 1 is interesting as it supports the overall picture, and aligns well with what previous research has shown.

TABLE I
GRADE STATISTICS AND CLASS SIZE.

Measurement	2002	2003	2004
GPA for the class	3.02	3.15	3.07
A's	15.6%	29.2%	23.4%
B's	71.9%	58.3%	59.6%
C's	12.5%	12.5%	17.0%
No of students	32	24	47

GPA = Grade point average. 4=A, 3=B, 2=C, 1=D, 0=F.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, the small empirical study indicates that the strategy of starting every lecture in the considered course with a small joke had a positive impact both on the students' evaluations of the course, and on their grades. The "joke starting" strategy seems to have promoted a more relaxed and enjoyable classroom climate, improved teacher immediacy,

and stimulated more students to a deep approach to learning. The generality of these results beyond the studied case remains to be shown, but I hope that they may serve as an inspiration for others to see just how far a small joke may go. In a more general context the reported study may serve as an encouraging observation that relatively small changes to the lecture format (jokes being just one possible approach) can have a noticeable impact on student perceptions and learning.

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