



## Humor as a magic bullet? Associations of different teacher humor types with student emotions



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### ABSTRACT

In relying on the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions and the Instructional Humor Processing Theory, different teacher humor types (course-related, course-unrelated, self-disparaging and aggressive) are assumed to be connected with positive and negative emotions. In two studies we analyzed how students' perceptions of teacher humor types are associated with achievement emotions. In Study 1, a total of 985 ninth and tenth grade students in German classes at upper track secondary schools completed a questionnaire. Results of multilevel regression analyses indicated, as assumed, that course-related humor was positively associated with enjoyment and negatively associated with boredom and anxiety. In contrast, but in line with the hypotheses, aggressive humor was negatively associated with enjoyment and positively associated with boredom and anxiety. Study 2 extended the research to anger, further school subjects (English, mathematics and history at upper track secondary schools) and other grade levels ( $n = 731$  fifth to ninth grade students). The results were mostly replicated and provide support for the assumption that teacher humor should be course-related in order to deliver positive emotional experiences.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, research on student emotions with regard to teacher behavior has expanded (e.g. Keller, Hoy, Goetz, & Frenzel, 2015; Kunter, Frenzel, Nagy, Baumert, & Pekrun, 2011). There is no doubt that emotions are relevant for education and central to academic achievement as well as students' personality development. Thus, it is surprising that the impact learning environments have on students' emotions is largely unexplored (Boekaerts & Pekrun, 2016). Nevertheless, in the relevant literature it is generally assumed that humor plays a central role in everyday teaching and has positive effects on the learning environment (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011; Perrez, Huber, & Geissler, 2001) – assertions made in humor literature could even lead to the idea that humor functions as a magic bullet in instructional settings. However, current research lacks systematic examination of the relations between teacher humor and student achievement emotions, especially given that there are different types of teacher humor (e.g., Bieg & Dresel, 2016; Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010). By conducting two studies at upper track secondary schools in Germany, this paper addresses the connection between different teacher humor types and achievement emotions (enjoyment, boredom, anxiety and anger) reported by students, both on the individual level as

well on the aggregate classroom level, and thus has the potential to extend the current state of research concerning the role that humor can play in teaching.

#### 1.1. Achievement emotions

In class, teachers provoke a range of achievement emotions related to teaching, interacting with students, and judging student activities. Thus, in the school context different achievement emotions such as enjoyment, pride, anger, anxiety or boredom can arise. Pekrun (2006) defined achievement emotions as emotions tied directly to achievement activities (like studying) or achievement outcomes (success and failure), therefore these emotions can be segregated into activity and outcome emotions. Emotions can be grouped according to their valence (positive vs. negative), and to the degree of activation (activating vs. deactivating). Pekrun's (2006) Control-Value Theory (CVT) of emotions provides a broad framework to explain students' emotions. CVT comprises assumptions of the transactional stress model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), expectancy-value approaches (Turner & Schallert, 2001) and attributional theories (Weiner, 1985), and can therefore explain a large variety of emotions. According to CVT, emotions<sup>1</sup> arise when an individual is in or out of control of

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<sup>1</sup> In the present paper we focus in general on achievement emotions and simply refer to them as emotions hereafter.

actions and outcomes (subjective control appraisals), and actions and outcomes are subjectively valued as more or less important and personally relevant (subjective value appraisals). CVT assumes that anxiety will arise when an individual feels uncertain about having control over subjectively important tasks and the focus is on anticipated failure. Regarding enjoyment, it is assumed that this activity emotion results from a combination of positive competence appraisals (the activity can be controlled by the self) and positive appraisals of the intrinsic value of an action (pleasant activities). Anger arises when an activity seems to be controlled by others and is negatively valued (e.g. necessary effort is experienced as aversive) or when success or failure is dependent on other persons. With respect to boredom, the assumption is that this negative activity emotion will be experienced when the activity itself lacks importance or subjective value.

CVT further assumes that characteristics of the social learning environment—including the communicative behaviors of teachers—provide information related to controllability and values, which in turn are important for student emotions (Pekrun, 2006). In previous research it was found that teachers' own enjoyment and enthusiasm, interpreted as indicators of a positive value, were related positively to students' enjoyment (Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009). Given that teacher humor shows a conceptual proximity to teacher enthusiasm (Dresel et al., 2014) it could be expected that teacher humor embedded in social learning environments delivers information related to controllability and academic values, and therefore is important for students' emotions.

### 1.2. Teacher humor

Humor is defined as the intentional use of verbal and non-verbal communication that tends to result in laughter and joy and involves the communication of incongruous meanings that are somewhat amusing (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1991; Martin, 2007). Humor as a multidimensional concept has also proven to be useful when considering teacher humor (Bieg & Dresel, 2016; Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003; Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006). Studies with college students published by Wanzer et al. (2006) and Frymier et al. (2008), who explored the perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate teacher humor types, found five different dimensions (related and unrelated humor, other disparaging and self-disparaging humor and offensive humor), the work by Bieg and Dresel (2016) extended this research to secondary schools. Their empirical research with adolescents indicated four teacher humor types: first, teacher humor unrelated to course content with no thematic connection to the current class topic; second, self-disparaging teacher humor in which the teacher does or says amusing things about him/herself; third, teacher humor related to course content, meaning the teacher uses humor to explain or display specific current topics; and fourth, aggressive teacher humor which, comparable to the other-disparaging humor and offensive humor types found by Wanzer et al. (2006) and Frymier et al. (2008), denigrates or ridicules students. Humor related to course content is viewed as appropriate because this humor can help students to relate to the material and to recall and elaborate on the learning content – and thus to control the learning tasks (Wanzer et al., 2006). Teacher humor unrelated to course content or self-disparaging teacher humor can help to promote a positive teacher-student relationship or generate a positive classroom climate, and thus is also viewed as appropriate humor (Frymier et al., 2008; Wanzer et al., 2006). Aggressive teacher humor is viewed as inappropriate because it violates social and classroom norms and expectations and therefore provokes anger or sadness (Bieg & Dresel, 2016; Martin et al., 2003; Wanzer et al., 2006).

A helpful theoretical model to explain how teacher humor works in class is the Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT; Wanzer et al., 2010). The IHPT is an integrative theory that draws from incongruity-

resolution, disposition theory (Berlyne, 1960; LaFave, Haddad, & Maesen, 1996), and the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM, Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). According to IHPT students first have to recognize incongruity in a teacher's verbal or nonverbal behavior and then have to resolve or interpret it. Incongruity theory postulates that a surprising or contrasting element is crucial for humor (Berlyne, 1960). When something happens that is inconsistent with one's own expectations an incongruity arises which may be perceived as humorous. If a student does not resolve the incongruity, he/she will not get the humor and may be confused by the teacher's message. After resolving the incongruity, students may perceive the message as humorous and further evaluate this as either positive or negative. The central assumption of the disposition theory, on which the IHPT is also based, specifies that this evaluation depends on the target of the joke. If the humor targets individuals liked by the recipient it will not be perceived as funny and valued as negative in contrast to humor that targets individuals who are disliked (Frymier et al., 2008; Zillmann & Cantor, 1996). In this sense appropriate humor types should be valued positively while aggressive humor should be valued negatively. Thus, the presence of humor can directly affect the appraisals that underlie the humorous message. This positive affect generated by appropriate humor can motivate students to engage in elaboration. IHPT further postulates that students have to be motivated and must have the ability to process the instructional messages in order to benefit from the increased attention generated by teacher humor (Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Neuliep, 1991; Wanzer et al., 2010). Here ELM emphasizes two possible routes when receiving a message—central and peripheral—individuals who are following the central route pay attention to the message arguments, elaborate on them and cognitive changes occur (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). If teacher humor is related to the course content it may enhance a student's ability to process and, consequently, to elaborate on and understand the learning material. When a teacher uses humor in instruction, students may pay more attention because the incongruity must be resolved (Wanzer et al., 2010). In summary, IHPT and CVT of emotions provide explanations as to why certain teacher humor types affect student learning positively or negatively, and the variability in student perceptions of the appropriateness of teacher humor (Wanzer et al., 2010).

### 1.3. Teacher humor and student emotions

Some evidence for the relationship between humorous tasks and material and student emotions has already surfaced in research. Humorous tasks and material can impact emotions in that they promote positive affect and reduce negative affect (e.g., Cann, Calhoun, & Nance, 2000). Furthermore, humorous stimuli fulfill a protective function against the negative effects of anxiety (Cann et al., 2000). Specifically, humor is said to create a positive affect that is incompatible with anxiety (Ford, Ford, Boxer, & Armstrong, 2012). Ford et al. (2012) set out to determine if humorous material prior to a difficult math test does indeed inhibit anxiety. The experiment revealed that participants in the humorous condition performed better on the math test and reported less anxiety than participants in a neutral condition. Matarazzo, Durik, and Delaney (2010) also conducted experiments with humorous tasks to test the effects of humor on task interest, and investigated whether humor can reduce negative emotions and increase positive emotions. No main effects were found regarding humorous tasks predicting happiness or anxiety, but an interaction effect revealed that the humorous tasks led to lower anger for individuals with low interest.

Apart from these experimental studies on humorous task material, researchers have found that by using teacher humor the learning environment is perceived as more enjoyable (Stuart & Rosenfeld, 1994; Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Wanzer et al., 2010; Ziv, 1979). Further it was determined that self-disparaging teacher humor is related to less anxiety in students (Bryant & Zillmann, 1989; Cornett, 1986; Neuliep, 1991; Torok et al., 2004; Wanzer et al.,

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