The Effective use of Humor in the Sport Management Classroom

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Many instructors agree that the incorporation of humor in the classroom climate creates an atmosphere that is conducive to student learning and there have been many research studies conducted to support this assertion (Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010). Some prominent studies indicate that the use of humor by the instructor facilitate student learning (Davies & Apter, 1980; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). However, some have found that this is not necessarily true (Ziv, 1988). Other research studies on the use of humor by instructors have focused on the type of humor used (Gorham & Cristophel, 1990) and why instructors chose to utilize humor as an instructional methodology in the classroom (Aylor & Opplinger, 2003; Frymier & Weser, 2001; White, 2001).

The primary factor in determining if humor in the classroom enhances student learning seems to be if it is appropriate or not and used in the proper setting. Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk (2008) examined this concept by relying on theories that explain why certain stimuli are deemed to be humorous. They determined that three theories were central to the explanation of the elements of appropriate humor in the classroom: incongruity theory (Berlyne, 1960), arousal relief theory (Berlyne, 1966), and disparagement or superiority theory (Wolff, Smith, & Murray, 1934). Incongruity theory demonstrates how humorous messages are cognitively processed by receivers. For humorous messages to be evaluated as funny, the receiver must detect an occurrence that is inconsistent with his or her expectations for that specific communication context (LaFave et al., 1996). Arousal relief theory does not seek to define humor, but instead states the purpose of humor is to facilitate a release of tension or energy and focuses on the functional role of humor (Smuts, 2009). Disparagement theory asserts that humor is derived from the recognition of one’s superiority over others (Butcher, 2000).

Institutions of higher education have come under fire lately and teaching effectiveness has been particularly scrutinized. Respected scholars such as Boyer and Astin have emphasized the need for instructional improvement in higher education. Perhaps the most important factor in effective teaching revolves around the connection created between the instructor and the student (Pollio & Humphreys, 1996). The action of the instructor influences the quality of instruction and the learning environment that is created. Thus, the student’s quality of instructional experience is primarily shaped by the instructor. Because of this fact, faculty must be creative in creating an environment conducive to optimal student learning. When an instructor constructs a supportive social climate, students are more likely to be receptive to learning. Humor is often identified as a teaching technique for developing a positive learning environment and can be a catalyst for creating an atmosphere where students are excited about learning.

The purpose of this presentation is to identify opportunities for humor in the sport management classroom, discuss how humor affects learning outcomes, and present guidelines for the appropriate use of humor.