HUMOR AS A TOOL FOR ADDRESSING THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN DURING INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

When designing instructional materials, whether for in-person or online information literacy instruction, lesson plans should be designed to address the affective domain as well as the cognitive domain. Humor can be a tool for addressing the affective domain, especially at the time when students are first exposed to information literacy concepts. Research into the affective domain suggests that in order to successfully acquire a cluster of new skills, such as information literacy, students must approach the task with a positive attitude (Martin & Briggs, 1986). Simply mastering the cognitive aspects of those skills is insufficient. Without a positive attitude, students will not learn to value those skills, or be willing to practice them when more convenient, if inferior, options present themselves. Humor in the classroom promotes positive attitudes toward the instructor and the subject matter. It also encourages students to pay attention to the lesson, which they might not have initially been inclined to do for the sake of the subject matter alone. In the absence of affective student learning outcomes that help promote positive attitudes toward information literacy and the pleasure of learning to become an independent seeker of knowledge, students are left possessing the skills but not the drive to become information literate individuals.

Evaluation of the affective domain has historically focused on grading students on their attitudes, emotions, or evidence of personal growth. Predictably, this approach has not been popular: Judging students on their cognitive abilities

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has historically seemed more reasonable than judging them on their feelings (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1956). Feelings are difficult to accurately measure, whereas cognitive abilities are relatively easy to measure and test. We believe the affective domain can and should be assessed. Not to grade students on their adoption of values consistent with information literacy, but rather to assess and inform the creation or modification of instructional materials. To make this approach work, any lesson plan or online tutorial would then need both cognitive and affective student learning objectives. We would also point out that the question is not whether or not to include affective goals when designing lesson plans. Those goals are already there, implied if not explicit (Miller, 2005). The question is whether to make an effort to measure success in meeting those goals. At this point, a brief discussion of learning domains and their relationship to information literacy instruction is in order.

LEARNING DOMAINS AND INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Learning domains divide the mechanisms of human learning into three categories: Psychomotor, cognitive, and affective (Bloom, 1956, p. 7). The psychomotor domain is crucial for the adoption of skills requiring hand-eye coordination and other physical tasks, and is not especially relevant to information literacy instruction, so it will not be discussed here. The cognitive domain involves intellectual skills, and organizes those skills by degree of complexity. At the lowest level, there is the learning and recalling of facts, and skills progress in complexity up to analysis and synthesis at the highest levels. For example, a student of literature might first read and memorize facts about a play and its history. Later, that student would identify themes and write essays analyzing them. At the highest level, the student would write original works of literature that make use of theme and other literary elements.

The cognitive domain is most often the focus of university-level education, and a great deal of effort has been made to create effective measures to assess this domain (Bloom, 1956).

The affective domain involves attitudes and values, and is organized along a continuum that describes the progression of internalizing values. At the beginning of the continuum a person transitions from ignorance of a phenomenon to awareness of it, and progresses along the continuum by choosing to pay attention to it, then by reacting to the phenomenon with good will. Later, the person chooses to make an effort to interact with the phenomenon, and eventually makes it a determining force in his or her life. For example, that same student of literature would begin by becoming aware that literature exists, realize that it is qualitatively different from technical writing or other prose, and then begin to read selected works. At the next level, the student would start to enjoy literature, and that enjoyment would translate to time and money spent on searching for and acquiring more literature, and perhaps engaging in book clubs or other opportunities to appreciate literature. At the highest level, the student would develop a nuanced appreciation of literature, and make reading a regular part of his or her life (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia 1956).

These distinctions among learning domains are not meant to describe actual divisions in how people learn, but rather serve as useful intellectual constructs to help us better make sense of how learning occurs. As Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia (1956) put it, "The fact that we attempt to analyze the affective area separately from the cognitive is not intended to suggest that there is a fundamental separation. There is none" (p. 45). Learning domains are fundamentally interconnected, and it is for this reason that undue emphasis should not be placed on any single domain. There is even cause to suspect that over-emphasis of one domain can come at the expense of another. Consider high school mathematics instruction: Students learn algebra, trigonometry, and perhaps calculus. Most high school students are required to attain at least a basic proficiency in these areas. Along with that proficiency, however, comes resentment, enough of it that it is something of a cliché to report disliking high school math class. Acquisition of skills in a field, then, does not necessarily impart desire to perform those skills, or an appreciation of their value. It is at this point that the connection between the affective learning domain and information literacy instruction becomes important.

Information literacy is made up of primarily cognitive skills, but the desire to employ those skills, especially when doing so is inconvenient, falls into the affective domain. Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia (1956) noted that "Under some conditions the development of cognitive behaviors may actually destroy certain desired affective behaviors and that, instead of a positive relation between growth in cognitive and affective behavior, it is conceivable that there may be an inverse relation between growth in the two domains" (p. 20). Like the example of high school mathematics, it is our contention that an exclusive focus on cognitive student learning outcomes creates such conditions in which the affective suffers at the expense of the cognitive. Having information literacy skills and being an information literate individual are different things, and that difference lies in the affective domain. The information literate individual values information literacy, and makes a practice of going out of his or her way to exercise those skills. The best information literacy skills in the world are useless if they are not exercised, and taking the affective domain into account when teaching those skills is an effective way to avoid this problem: "If library instruction attends to developing positive attitudes, then the instruction can influence behavior in a positive sense as well" (Vidmar, 1998, p. 79). One of the main impediments to trying to promote the development of positive attitudes has been the lack of suitable tools. The greater emphasis on the cognitive domain has given us effective, time-tested methods for promoting development in that area: active learning is one example. The affective domain has enjoyed no such advantage.

HUMOR AS A TOOL FOR ADDRESSING THE COGNITIVE DOMAIN

We contend that humor is a suitable tool for addressing the affective domain. It is especially effective at the basic levels, where external intervention is most necessary because students have not yet learned to value what they are being taught. As students move along the affective continuum, they begin by becoming aware that information literacy exists, and that they lack most of the skills involved. At the next stage, they recognize it possesses some value and voluntarily pay attention to it, interested in learning more. At the third stage, they respond positively, having decided they like it. Beginning at the point at which students respond with positive emotions, and continuing to the end of the continuum, their motivation to learn comes increasingly from within. The first two stages, however, rely almost entirely on external motivation, and they are also the stages almost exclusively covered during information literacy instruction. Fortunately, these are also the stages at which humor is especially effective. Humor in the classroom has been found to promote attention and generate good will (Vossler & Sheidlower, 2011). These two byproducts of humor, attention and good will, match up perfectly to the second and third steps of the affective continuum: attention and good will. After becoming aware that information literacy exists, students must choose to pay attention to the instruction, and then respond to that instruction with good will. Humor generates the emotional states students must feel before they can progress along the affective continuum, and internalize the values necessary for becoming information literate.

Leading students along these first three stages is challenging, but it is especially so for the subject of information literacy. To begin with, students of the present generation have grown up with the Internet, and are accustomed to free online search engines satisfying their research needs. To them, information literacy is a tough sell; they do not want to hear how what they have always relied on is no longer sufficient. Because students believe there is no value in what we are advocating, they are reluctant to pay attention to the material. Furthermore, students typically enter the library expecting a dull or unpleasant experience, leaving them disinclined to respond positively (Trefts & Blakeslee, 2000; Petry, 1998; Sarkodie-

Mensah, 1998). Given that information literacy instruction begins at such a disadvantage, attention to the affective domain is all the more necessary.

This is where humor in the classroom becomes a valuable tool. Contrary to popular imagination, humor is a skill that can be learned and taught (Vossler & Sheidlower, 2011). Its primary value lies in setting the emotional tone among a group of people, whether in a comedy club or in a classroom. That emotional tone can be used as an effective backdrop for teaching and learning. From the perspective of cognitive development, humor is of only limited utility. Vossler and Sheidlower also found that under some circumstances it can indeed promote information retention and comprehension, but its primary value is social in nature. As a social activity, it is a complex and high-stakes endeavor. For example, failed humor can result in loss of respect, and misunderstood humor can turn a previously receptive audience hostile. Although these potential consequences are severe, they should not serve as deterrence, but rather as incentive to take the implementation of humor in the classroom seriously. Take heart surgery as a rough analogy: any number of errors could lead to the death of the patient, but success usually means the patient will live, perhaps even thrive. Without the surgery and its attendant risks, suffering or death is all but certain. Without humor in the classroom (or some other tool that effectively addresses the affective domain), students will have less help internalizing the values of information literacy. The rewards for success dwarf the consequences of failure. Also like surgery, humor is a skill, and the chances of error decrease with experience.

Although there are a wide variety of humorous techniques that can be implemented during library instruction, humorous analogies are not especially dependent on delivery to be effective, so they are more easily implemented by teachers relatively new to using humor in the classroom. They are also efficient in terms of time: New concepts require explanations, and a humorous analogy requires roughly the same amount of class time as a serious explanation. Once created, humorous analogies can be re-used indefinitely, provided they do not rely on cultural markers with limited life spans, such as celebrities or news items. Finally, humorous analogies address both the cognitive and affective domains. In addition to being humorous and thereby maintaining student attention and generating good will, they require students to connect existing knowledge to a new concept.

Kimbel Library Video Tutorials

In 2010, librarians at Kimbel Library created a pilot program of five instructional videos addressing fundamental information literacy skills. These videos were created in cooperation with Coastal Carolina University's First Year Experience Program (FYE), and were designed to introduce FYE students to fundamental information literacy concepts. Because the videos were intended to reach an audience of approximately 2,000 students, and would be assessed automatically through our course management software, this seemed to be an ideal opportunity to assess the use of humor as a tool for addressing the affective domain.

The objective was to create videos that students would enjoy, or at least not find aversive. By providing instruction that addressed both the affective domain (through humor) and the cognitive domain (through a multimedia presentation of lecture, text, and diagrams), we hoped students would achieve the cognitive goals of our program without developing negative associations with information literacy, the library, or librarians. Each video was created around two outcomes: one cognitive outcome and one affective outcome. Each video had a different cognitive outcome, but all videos shared the same affective outcome, although that outcome was measured separately for each video.

In the interest of brevity, we will not list all of the cognitive student learning outcomes here, but will instead focus on the single affective student learning outcome: students will enjoy the humor in this video. To assess for this outcome, each student was asked to choose yes or no answer in response to the question "Did you enjoy the humor in this video?" In the interest of encouraging honest replies, students were informed that their responses to this question were required, but would not be graded. As with most affective assessment efforts, answers had to be taken on faith that students were responding with honesty, and not giving us the answers they thought we wanted. The data collected from this assessment were used to evaluate our efforts to implement humor in the video tutorial program, and especially to identify videos that were insufficiently entertaining. Based on the initial numbers, we selected an 80% yes response rate as the minimum acceptable approval rating for a video. Any video falling below that number is flagged for revision. Results ranged from a yes response rate of 79% to 86%, and are detailed in table 1.

Table 1

Response	Video 1	Video 2	Video 3	Video 4	Video 5
Yes	86%	83%	84%	79%	83%
No	14%	17%	16%	21%	17%

Conclusion

Research on learning strongly suggests that learning "is only successful when both cognitive and affective behaviors are developed" (Martin & Briggs, 1986, p. 10) together, and that over-emphasis of the cognitive domain can lead to a situation in which the learner obtains the ability to implement a skill set, but lacks the desire to do so. By using humor as a tool to address the affective domain, instructional materials can be created that promote the development of cognitive skills as well as positive attitudes toward those skills. Although the affective domain is more difficult to assess than the cognitive domain (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1956), it can and should be done.

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