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During a Pandemic, Be Ridiculous Whenever Possible

Emily S. Kahm, *College of Saint Mary, Omaha*

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My teaching style has always been a bit on the lighthearted side; I crack jokes, use ridiculous metaphors, draw inelegant pictures on the whiteboard and make my students guess what I'm trying to convey in an odd version of academic Pictionary. Being funny is a great way to keep students engaged! But now that my school, along with everyone else's, has gone fully online for the duration of the semester, I've had to reframe my humor—what I usually think of as a useful teaching tactic, I now see as an indispensable tool for teaching effectively in a global pandemic.

It's already cliché to say that everybody's stressed out by this health crisis, but the sheer variety of ways to be stressed is staggering, and my students seem to embody every one of them. I teach at a women's college where traditional undergraduates learn alongside non-traditional working students; about a quarter of whom are parents. We're heavy on the health sciences, so while lots of our undergrads are suddenly unemployed from their server and retail jobs, those who work in pharmacies, elder care, and hospitals are being begged to pick up extra shifts. My classes are an eclectic combination of the desperately bored and the profoundly overworked. The only thing they all seem to have in common is how badly they need a laugh right now. I can't cure their anxiety, but I can offer them a momentary opportunity to forget about it while they're smirking at one of my quips. These little breaks are a big part of how we can cope with our new normal.

I usually rely on reading a room for my jokes, so I've had to get more creative. I'm terrible at creating dynamic PowerPoints, for example, and I'm now using them for nearly every lecture. To keep things interesting, I insert snarky comments into my slides making fun of my own dismal formatting and don't call attention to them while I present, leaving them like Easter eggs for the attentive watcher. When I require Zoom meetings, I ask every attendee if they have a nearby pet or small child they can put on screen for the rest of us to coo over before beginning our discussion. I'm still teaching loads of content in the midst of all these less-serious moments, but it's obvious that the content flows better when I make space to be a little silly. When my students pop up on webcam to talk about their upcoming papers, they're visibly tense-this disappears almost immediately when I say that I do want to talk about their paper, but I also insisted on this meeting because I'm lonely and want to be reminded that other humans exist. They smile, I smile back, and for a second or two, they feel better-and then are better able to listen and learn.

Beyond benefiting my students, prioritizing humor also helps me look forward to teaching and gives me a hint of that refreshing energy I used to get from being in the classroom with so many personalities. Staring at my laptop for hours on end is a little more bearable when I'm also thinking about whether there's a way I can insert a picture of a chicken into my presentation so it'll flash on screen at random intervals while I'm talking. Teaching is a haven for me amid my own apprehension, and it feels even more purposeful when I can try to make it a haven for my students too.

There is no one teaching style that will spell perfect success in this tumultuous time, but for even the most serious professor, I urge you-try for some silliness! Change your Zoom background so you look like you're lecturing from the middle of the zombie apocalypse, offer pictures of your pet as a reward for students completing required tasks, come up with a rude nickname for your online learning platform (I like to refer to Canvas[1] as "that jerkwad") and use it whenever part of your haphazardly constructed course site doesn't work the way you thought it would. Give yourself the gift of being a little ridiculous, and you'll find that your students' attitudes-and their work-will benefit from the break.

[1] No offense to Canvas. It is a beautiful, elegant system, even when I can't for the life of me figure out why it keeps taking assignments off of the student to-do list.

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