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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Being Silly

Emily O. Gravett, *James Madison University*

Blog Series: Embodied Teaching

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Due to a snow delay, my seven-year-old daughter came with me to class the other day. I teach an honors' version of our intro Religions of the World course in the morning. She sat at a desk in the back corner of the room, working on a story about, I think, vampires. She nibbled on peanuts. She was the world's cutest TA.

At the end of class, as we were walking back to the car, she said, "Mom, I noticed that the students didn't laugh at any of your jokes." A pause. "Was this EMBARRASSING for you??"

I laughed and told her, "No, not really, I'm used to it."

I like being a silly willy," I said, "and it doesn't really matter to me if they like it."

Most of my students don't get my sense of humor. They don't know the references that some of my jokes depend on; I once made mention of the TV show *Friends* in a class and all I got back were blinking eyeballs. This was not a high point. We don't share much these days, me and my students. I constantly feel like that Steve Buscemi gif ("How do you do, fellow kids?"). Or maybe my students do get my jokes and they simply don't think the jokes are all that good.

Oh well. ~\ (□) _/

Silliness can be tricky (and is often presented as inappropriate) in professional contexts.

Obviously, people don't always find the same jokes funny. We may worry about offending. Enough self-deprecating digs and we may start to inadvertently undermine ourselves. There are definitely risks to making light of certain topics—or even being perceived as doing so. (Though some of the sharpest social critiques come in the form of satire, like *The Onion* simply reposting the same story about gun violence every time a mass shooting occurs in the United States.)

But I also sense a resistance to silliness (and playfulness and jokes and levity and all the like) in certain corners of academia, specifically. There seems to be an association between being serious and being taken seriously. That somehow our intellectual cachet or credentials are tied to big words and furrowed brows and the cult of busyness. Certainly we academics have a reputation for humorless stuffiness, paired properly with a tweed jacket and a pocket watch, of course, even if it isn't true. I do worry sometimes that people think I'm light on substance simply because I'm quick to laugh.

Some scholars have written about how incorporating humor into the classroom can have benefits for students and their learning. I would like for this to be true in my classroom too—at the very least, I don't want my jokes to HARM anyone—but this isn't mainly why I deploy humor. It's not some savvy or strategic teaching technique. I do it because this is a part of who I am—an important part of who I am—and I do not want to have to become a different, fragmented, or shell of a person when I teach (or do any other part of my job).

I want to be whole—as whole as I can possibly be—when I show up in the classroom. There is enough emotional labor involved in teaching (and I'm using this term in the way Arlie Hochschild actually meant it) to tire even the best of us out. Not being authentic during the hours I teach requires additional levels of effort and exhaustion that I simply do not want to exert, if I can help it. And I want students to witness this wholeness, even if it turns out not to be their cup of tea. (Not unrelated, this is part of the reason I brought my kid to class. I'm a mom...and I refuse to pretend I'm not in order to be “professional.”) My self is not there to please students—or to conform to what (I assume or can discern) they might find pleasing. Who I am is not (or should not be) up for others' approval or adjudication. Maybe there is a lesson in that for them too.

Now, as I've written before, there are obviously risks to disclosing who we really are in the classroom, especially depending on the identities some of us hold. (And there are aspects of our whole selves that do not deserve to be shared with people like students who haven't necessarily earned our trust.) But being silly is an aspect of my personality that feels genuine and low-stakes enough to bring into the classroom space. It feels good to be me, for as many hours of the day as possible.

For what it's worth, my daughter doesn't think I'm very funny either. She'll get me some day. Or she won't. It doesn't matter. ^_(_)_/

<https://wabash.center/2023/05/being-silly/>

